The impact of busing in Charlotte

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAYNA DURBIN GLEAVES AND DAVID WALBERT

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were integrated after the Supreme Court's 1971 ruling in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. By 1970 the school system no longer had schools that were legally segregated — students attended "neighborhood schools," the schools nearest their homes. But the Supreme Court ruled that the school system must actively dismantle the "dual school system" it had created in the era of segregation. Beginning in 1971, Charlotte-Mecklenburg — like many other school systems around the country — began busing students to schools around the county in an effort to create a racial balance in the schools.

In 2001, the U.S Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that Charlotte-Mecklenburg had achieved "unitary" status — its schools no longer bore the mark of the segregation era. As a result, the school system returned to a system of neighborhood schools.

In these excerpts from oral history interviews, you'll hear three speakers with different perspectives on school integration in Charlotte.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Which speakers do you think support integrated schools? Which support neighborhood schools? Did any of the speakers seem undecided?
2. What are some of the specific negative and positive consequences of integration expressed by the speakers?

Arthur Griffin

Arthur Griffin is an African-American man who attended segregated schools in the 1950s and 1960s. He graduated from Second Ward High School, an African-American high school in Charlotte, North Carolina which closed in 1969. He later became involved in school politics. In this oral history interview, which took place in May 1999, he discusses desegregation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

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Arthur Griffin

> Desegregation opens up a whole vista of knowledge and opportunity that's not always on a piece of paper, but it's in the interaction with others that you broaden your knowledge base. And by broadening your knowledge base, you broaden your opportunities. African-American kids now hear about occupations and jobs and careers that they wouldn't ordinarily hear about if you're segregated. And likewise for whites.
>
> I mean, desegregation is good for white kids, to understand about others that are different, about African Americans, who are a large minority group in America. Likewise Hispanics. And I don't know about the future because I don't study all this stuff, but I do read a little bit, and I'm told that America's browning. That the demographics will change. If you want your white kid to be successful, if you want your white kid to be a corporate president, who's going to work for your white kid? Going to be a minority. Even from the selfish perspective, you know, of wanting to be a Wall Street wizard and be the President of the United States. Who's going to be Vice President? Who's going to be in the Cabinet? Who's going to be the employees in the middle-management of government? It's going to be minorities. And a minority, maybe, I hope and pray, will be President one day.
>
> But I'm saying to you, if we're going to get along in America, looking prospectively, then it makes sense to be in a diverse setting, because we're moving so quickly to our gated communities in the suburbs, and our churches aren't - where else? Unless you look at the purpose of education differently. If you look at the purpose of education as being one where you prepare youngsters for the future, then we see the future. This is a part of our obligation, is to prepare youngsters. If their future's going to be diverse, where else do you prepare youngsters?

Latrelle McAllister

Latrelle McAllister is an African-American woman who attended West Charlotte High School from 1973 until 1976, during the first years of integration. She speaks about her experiences of both segregated and integrated schools during her interview, and compares and contrasts the two types of schools.

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Latrelle McAllister

> However, one of the things that I think is important, though, is that students do have the opportunity to have exposure to cultures outside their own. You know, I work in human resources and a lot of the issues that I see in my job come from cultural clashes. Not necessarily racial clashes, but cultural clashes. I was brought up differently from you and so I see things differently than you. I approach problems differently. I communicate differently. I think that integrated situations are beneficial

to African-American children because it gives them the opportunity to develop those skills that they'll need as they work and live in the society at large.

So, I think that there are some benefits to integration, although, I'm not sure that — you know, my husband and I have chosen not to put our child on the bus. We take him to school. But there are children who have to get up as early as 5:15 and do that. And for those parents who aren't able to get their children to school in any other way, I imagine that is a concern for them. So, from a humanistic standpoint I really don't advocate children having to get up that early and have maybe three, four hours of their day spent on a bus. I think that there are a lot of bright minds in the education community and I think there are some ways to come together and partner to solve those problems. I think those problems aren't those that are easily attacked.

But, like I said, I just don't know. There's still some debate about the benefits of it. For instance, if in school, especially elementary school, if I got in trouble, if I got in trouble on the way home, or if I got in trouble in the community at large, I could be sure that my mother would know about it or my father would know about it and that something would be done about it. There's not that type of support. There's not that village that we talk about that's important in raising and nurturing and shaping young minds. Perhaps a part of the movement away from busing is the movement toward establishing those villages where we can nurture our children. That's probably not a bad approach. But, I do think that there's value in exposure to other cultures.

Ned Irons

Ned Irons is a white student who attended West Charlotte High School in Charlotte, NC during the late 1990s, many years after the Swann ruling required the school to integrate in the early 1970s, but before busing ended in 2001. West Charlotte is a traditionally African-American school and is one of the oldest schools in the district, so it retains a lot of support from the African-American community in Charlotte. In his interview, which took place his senior year, Ned talks about the experience of attending an integrated school.

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Pamela Grundy (interviewer)

Did you have the stereotypes before you came here?

Ned Irons

Oh, yeah. And I think it wouldn't be accurate to say that there are people who are completely open minded and come to West Charlotte and don't have any stereotypes. Everybody's, "Oh, I love everybody, and I don't have any preconceived notions of how you're supposed to act." I think everybody, whether consciously or subconsciously, has preconceived notions of people before they meet them. West Charlotte just changed that for me. And, for me, I grew up in sort of a liberal household, so I don't think I had as many stereotypes as some of the people that I associated with when I came

here. To see them now from when they were a sophomore, they have changed completely, and not through any intentional actions but just through speaking and communicating and being friends with people who aren't like them. I mean, it's hard to be friends with somebody and then to carry that stereotype onto somebody else, because you say, "It doesn't apply here, so how can I be sure that it applies to everyone I know?"

Pamela Grundy

How do you see that change?

Ned Irons

Mostly the way I see it is in the way people speak about each other. In sophomore year there's a lot of "they's" and "we's." And, "well, that's how they do it, and that's just how they are, that's how they speak." And now it's, I think it's individual more, "Oh, well he is a very bright kid," or "She speaks that way because of this." I think there's a lot more understanding of cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic backgrounds where you don't just put a label on it. I think you more grow to understand why something is the way it is, why behavior comes across the way it does."

On the web

Desegregating public schools: Integrated vs. neighborhood schools

http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/2710

In this high school lesson plan, students will learn about the history of the "separate but equal" U.S. school system and the 1971 Swann case which forced Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to integrate. Students will examine the pros and cons of integration achieved through busing, and will write an argumentative essay drawing on information from oral histories.

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David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.