Against the Odds: As Others Scale Back On School Integration, Charlotte Presses On

Parents Have Helped Create A Model Busing Program; Harmony Aids Economy

Test Scores Remain a Problem

By Arthur S. Hayes. *Wall Street Journal* 08 May 1991: PAGE A1.

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- Court-ordered busing evokes ugly images: violence, tear gas, boycotts, white flight. It evokes Boston, Chicago, Detroit.

So how to explain Charlotte?

On a spring afternoon at West Charlotte High School, a trio of teen-age girls -- two black, one white -- chatter aimlessly in the parking lot. Inside the building, a multiracial horticultural club decorates a foyer. The student executive committee, a warm picture of integrated young America, convenes in a nearby classroom. Te' Ali Coley, a black committee member of pro football proportions, delivers the party line: "If you're racist when you come here, you have to change your ideas or put them under cover."

The school was all-black in the days before forced busing began in 1971. Now it is almost 40% white, yet signs of racial strife are few and far between. "I never thought I'd see this in the South," says William P. Hamlin Sr., West Charlotte Class of '63, specifically noting the school's festive and integrated homecoming parade.

Particularly in a city with a history of racial confrontation, it does seem extraordinary. In many urban centers, white flight has left school districts overwhelmingly black. The U.S. Supreme Court has given school districts new latitude to end busing plans implemented as long as 20 years ago, and some cities appear eager to revert to neighborhood schools. Not Charlotte. Its school board has steadfastly rejected any proposals to end its forced busing program.

Charlotte's success with busing, in the face of frustration in cities such as Boston, may offer some lessons for other cities still seeking to integrate their schools. The Charlotte program is the product of parental commitment -- including a big boost from middle-class whites -- and perseverance. Above all else, says Roslyn Mickelson, a University of North Carolina sociologist who has studied the school system, it is the result of "a consensus for desegregation across class, across race and across political parties."

Busing for integration was necessary because Charlotte has segregated housing patterns. The school board says 55% of the county's black students, but only 15% of white students, live within four miles of the center of Charlotte.

But, in terms of school integration, Charlotte has something going for it that most other cities can't match: Its school district includes both urban and suburban areas. This means that whites have only three choices: try to make busing work, put their children in private schools or move out of the entire metropolitan area. What they can't do is avoid busing by leaving the city for the suburbs because the suburbs are part of the busing plan.

In the 1970s, some other cities tried to extend busing across city-suburb borders, but the Supreme Court refused to allow it unless the school districts already were combined. In Boston, where the school district includes only the urban area, public school enrollment dropped from 90,000 to 56,000 during 11 years of busing, partly because the separate suburbs beckoned to whites. School districts in such cities as Detroit, Chicago and Dallas also lost a majority of white students.

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg County district, public-school enrollment has dropped slightly since busing began, while private-school enrollment has increased slightly. Before busing, the school system was 71% white; today, it is 58% white.

In Boston, paid experts with impressive academic credentials devised a mathematical formula for pupil assignments, often neglecting community interests and ethnic tensions. The result was chaos and violence. "Boston did everything wrong," says Gary Orfield, director of the National School Desegregation Project at the University of Chicago.

In Charlotte, after a rocky start and sporadic violence, federal Judge James B. McMillan put the task of developing a pupil assignment plan in the hands of parents. The parents' organization, called the Citizens Advisory Group, was a biracial coalition of mostly middle-class parents led by Maggie Ray, a white housewife who now teaches at West Charlotte High. By 1975, four years after the Supreme Court mandated busing in Charlotte, the coalition had developed a final plan that addressed the fears of both blacks and poor whites that their children would be bused disproportionately and the hopes of all parents that bus rides would be short.

The pupil-assignment plan for West Charlotte High, situated in a center-city black enclave about 10 minutes from the city's midpoint, answered parents' concerns. Both affluent and poor whites were bused to the school from communities not farther away than a 20-minute drive. In addition, great care was taken to strengthen the school while preserving its legacy as a revered all-black institution that had helped produce many of Charlotte's black professionals.

The school board made West Charlotte more attractive to both white and black parents by adding the system's only open-studies curriculum for advanced students. The school also added the system's only English-as-a-second-language curriculum, further spicing up the school's multiracial culture.

According to the results of a poll by Louis Harris & Associates, affluent whites and blacks tend to oppose busing more than others out of fear that their children's education will suffer. But in Charlotte, the more affluent parents embraced the integrated schools. "Affluent whites have power," says Ms. Ray, recalling how a needed fence was erected at one school only after white

parents protested. "That sort of thing began to happen all over the system. Integration dispersed the power of white parents," Ms. Ray says.

Some observers say the effort to forge the busing plan triggered a chain reaction. In his 1988 book "The Dream Long Deferred," which chronicles Charlotte's busing story, Frye Gaillard concluded that the pro-busing group set in motion a biracial activism that led to the political emergence of Harvey Gantt, who was elected Charlotte's first black mayor in 1983 and barely failed to unseat Sen. Jesse Helms last year.

Ms. Mickelson, the sociologist, who has two children in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, says racial harmony helped fuel the city's economic development by making the city attractive to foreign businesses and major-league sports franchises. "There's is a real different sense of community here," Ms. Mickelson says. "It is very religious and it's also very enlightened. There is a respect for the law."

The pupil assignment plan dictates that blacks should not make up more than 50% of any student body, although about 20 of the district's 104 schools exceed the limit. About 52,000 students are bused daily; about 12,000 of those are bused to achieve racial balance. Most routes take about 20 minutes.

No one pretends that perfect racial harmony has been achieved. Students say racial animosity is readily apparent at North Mecklenburg High, a nearby school with a large rural student population. Indeed, when a black reporter approaches, one of about 20 white male teen-agers standing outside the cafeteria hollers, "Black man, black man: What are you doing in our parking lot?"

Michael Turner, the black principal of North Mecklenburg High, says he can only guess that the student wasn't being racist but reacting to a stranger. But he adds: "I think we've still got a lot of work to do. I don't care where you are in the South. We're no exception to that." Mr. Turner says North Mecklenburg students are dealing with the school's image. For instance, the school's mascot used to be a Johnnie Reb; now it's a pirate.

Even at West Charlotte, the task of achieving both integration and social harmony is complex. Take the experience of April Turner, a model student and daughter of North Mecklenburg's principal. Two years ago, she wore a T-shirt to school that said, "It's a black thing. You wouldn't understand." Ms. Ray, the teacher who fought for busing in the early 1970s, was insulted. "I told her, `You're alienating me, I'm your friend,'" Ms. Ray says.

That quickly led to an informal discussion about race and the history of the civil-rights movement among a group of students nearby. "I didn't know that Ms. Ray had fought for civil rights," says Ms. Turner, now a freshman at the University of North Carolina. "I felt bad about offending her -- but I wasn't sorry for wearing the shirt."

A couple of years earlier, Neil Schofield, who is white, ran for class president and sprinkled his campaign speech with popular lines from rap songs as a way to reach out to black students. Some thought that bordered upon racial stereotyping, and a controversy brewed. But blacks voted for

him just the same, and he won. "If you want to get elected, you have to appeal to the black vote," he says, adding that the school has achieved a great deal because there are many multiracial friendships. "Everybody gets along," he says. "When you come to West Charlotte, you feel like a West Charlotte Lion."

Despite a good deal of interracial socializing, students still tend to congregate with others of their own race in the cafeteria, though they say they are just sitting with longtime friends from their mostly segregated neighborhoods. School dances are integrated but, some students say, not heavily attended because most whites don't go.

There is some interracial dating. Joy Berry, class of 1988, remembers having a bad experience when she dated a white student in her junior year. Her white girlfriends stared at her incredulously, she says, and black students uttered malicious stage whispers when she passed them in the hall. Some of her black male friends tried to persuade her that little good would come from dating a white. "I spent part of my senior year seeking some kind of acceptance that dating Allan was OK," Ms. Berry says. The high-school romance broke up later anyway.

When it comes to curricula and school performance, there is also some tension. For one thing, blacks complain that the teaching of black history is relegated to February, black history month. For another, blacks' test scores, a widely watched measure of the effects of school desegregation, have improved just slightly since busing began. In 1978, black ninth graders in the system trailed their white counterparts by 41 percentile points on standardized tests; today, white students' scores are about the same, blacks' are a little better, and the gap is 37 points.

Dr. Susan Henry, a school-system assessment specialist, says the gap is probably the result of class differences, not race, and the board is studying the problem.

Some critics also say the board's policy of "tracking" -- dividing students into fast track and slower learning groups -- undermines integration and does little to promote academic excellence. At West Charlotte, more blacks than whites fall into the slower classes. Until they take a core course that is required of everyone, many whites have little contact with blacks in high-school classrooms. "In math class, there would be three blacks out of 25 students," recalls Candace Hamlin, a black student who graduated in the top 10 of the Class of '87.

Barbara Ledford, principal of West Charlotte, rattles off a list of top black graduates as evidence that tracking isn't harming black students. "We have many fine minority students," she says. But she acknowledges that the non-advanced classes are "more heavily weighted with black students."

The school board is attempting to address the various parental concerns. Early this year, it hired Joseph Murphy, school superintendent at Prince George's County in Virginia, to run the schools. He hopes to improve minorities' test scores by adopting a version of the magnet-school program that succeeded in improving scores among Prince George's County students.

Magnet schools offer specialized curricula and attempt to lure students of both races to share in the enriched school environment. Theoretically, magnet schools foster integration because students agree to be bused to them voluntarily.

But as long as the Charlotte-area neighborhoods remain segregated, the board says it will have to maintain forced busing. A return to neighborhood schools will surely turn back the clock to one-race schools. And a majority of the board -- particularly members who grew up in an officially segregated society -- don't want to see that happen.

Outside Charlotte, even some longtime warriors in the desegregation fight seem to have soured on busing. Harvard Law School professor Derrick Bell, who once spearheaded suits aimed at requiring school busing, now says the bitter battles over integration ended up disrupting the education system, hampering blacks' academic performance and making race relations worse. Integration at any cost shouldn't be the goal, he says; educating black students should be. "The integrated culture has been basically a white culture," says Mr. Bell, who now supports efforts to create some well-funded, locally controlled all-black schools instead.

In Charlotte, Joseph Martin, a conservative white Republican member of the board of education, thinks otherwise. He says he became a convert to forced busing when he watched his daughter Elizabeth march in the West Charlotte homecoming parade in 1987. "I recall thinking how wonderful it was that my daughter had an opportunity to be part of a multicultural experience, since that opportunity had been denied to me in the days of segregation," says Mr. Martin.

"You can't separate education from integration," says his daughter, now a sophomore at Duke University. "There's a lot more to education than books."