What black students who were bused said about their experiences

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Last month, the issue of busing with the aim of desegregating schools was reinjected into the national political discourse at a Democratic presidential candidates' debate when Sen. Kamala D. Harris (Calif.) challenged former vice president Joe Biden about his stance.

Harris told him that she had been part of a busing program aimed at integrating the public school system in Berkeley, Calif. She said: "There was a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public schools, and she was bused to school every day. And that little girl was me."

She then asked Biden whether he thinks he was wrong to oppose busing decades ago. He replied that it wasn't busing he opposed but rather busing "ordered by the Department of Education." He also said that the Berkeley busing project was a decision made by local officials and therefore was "a local decision." Since the debate, Harris has said she does not now support federally mandated busing.

The post below looks at past busing experiments and the long-term effects, written by a renowned researcher on segregation in the United States. He is Richard Rothstein, a distinguished fellow of the nonprofit Economic Policy Institute and a senior fellow emeritus at the Thurgood Marshall Institute of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and of the Haas Institute at the University of California at Berkeley.

He is the author of a number of books, including his most recent, "The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America." A former national education writer for the New York Times, Rothstein also wrote books including "Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right" and "Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap." In 2013, Rothstein wrote a report titled "For Public Schools, Segregation Then, Segregation Since: Education and the Unfinished March."

Below is the version of Rothstein's piece that appeared on EPI's blog, which I was given permission to republish.

By Richard Rothstein

When Senator Kamala Harris told former Vice President Joe Biden "that little girl was me," she evoked a mostly forgotten era, a half-century distant, when federal courts mandated busing of black children to schools in white neighborhoods.

The court orders were controversial and unpopular amongst almost all whites and many blacks, and yet: assemble a list of African Americans in their mid-to-late '50s or early '60s, and who are the most successful lawyers, political leaders, executives in the nonprofit, corporate, and foundation sectors, or otherwise spread throughout the professional and managerial class, and you will find a disproportionate share were bused during the heyday of court-ordered school desegregation -- roughly 1968 to 1980.

Masterful books, one by Susan Eaton, "The Other Boston Busing Story," and another by a team led by Amy Stuart Wells "Both Sides Now," recount interviews with adults who had been bused for desegregation decades earlier. Eaton interviewed 65 African Americans who, as children, took part in a voluntary busing program that transferred students from Boston public schools to white suburbs where family sizes were declining, leaving schools with empty seats.

Wells's team interviewed 215 white and black adults who, as children, had been bused out of their segregated black schools in six cities: Austin, Texas; Charlotte, N.C.; Englewood, N.J.; Pasadena, Calif.; Shaker Heights, Ohio; and Topeka, Kansas. The books
have lost none of their relevance; indeed, if you are intrigued by Harris’ remark and you missed the Eaton and Wells books the first time around, this is a good time to get them from your local library or used bookstore and catch up.

Both the Wells team and Eaton found that the African-American adults who had experienced busing-for-desegregation considered that their relative success stemmed not only from the greater resources of the previously all-white schools to which they had been bused -- such as after-school clubs, AP classes, college counselors, better libraries, and lower student-to-teacher ratios -- but even more from their exposure to a majority white setting.

As adults, the black busing alumni said they were not intimidated by business and public sector jobs where their peers were mostly white. As one of them reflected, having attended a desegregated high school "makes me feel comfortable that I can go anywhere and not feel intimidated, I just feel like I belong and it didn't matter who was in the majority or minority, that I knew how to deal with all of them." Eaton summarized the impact of busing as "feelings of comfort, diminishing self-consciousness, and growing self-confidence in white settings."

When researching a review of the Eaton book in 2002, I spoke with an African American educational programmer for public television who had been bused to a suburban high school 20 years before. The school had a course that placed students in a corporate setting; they kept a journal for credit. The youngster was assigned to a public television station where she helped to research story ideas, follow up on leads, and answer viewer mail. Through that, she told me, "I met producers, writers, which is where I was headed."

She later graduated from Brown University, a place she had never heard of in her home neighborhood but with which everyone at her suburban school was familiar. She thought she had succeeded at Brown because, in elementary and high school, she said: "I had already sat next to white students. I had been on sports teams with them. I had been in politics with them. So at Brown I could deal with the academic part and not have to deal with the whole social part."

Unlike white parents in the districts the Wells team investigated, white parents in the Boston program were supportive -- participating suburban districts had citizen buy-in to volunteer their empty seats. Each bused student was assigned a local parent who sometimes hosted the black youth overnight if he or she stayed late for an after-school activity.

One black busing alumna told Eaton how she got a paid summer job at a law firm through her host mother's connections. Experiences like that also looked good on college applications, opening up other doors that otherwise would have been closed to black students. Some of the busing alumni developed lifelong relationships with their host parents who then continued to refer the students to prestigious college internships or, later, to permanent job openings. One black graduate remarked to Eaton: "Networking is white people's affirmative action."

The Wells team conducted interviews with white as well as black adults who had attended desegregated schools. The whites also mostly reported gratitude for the opportunity, often resisted by their parents. As adults, the whites felt more comfortable in diverse workplaces than their white colleagues who lacked integrated experiences in their youth.

The desegregation alumni's stereotypes of African Americans were challenged and reconsidered; the whites were less likely to blame black poverty on laziness or irresponsibility and, as the Wells team summarized, they tended to "overcome much of the physical fear of people of color that white people tend to carry around in their heads."

A striking theme from the interviews is the challenge white desegregation-veterans faced when they confronted what they now found to be absurd racial stereotypes held by their own spouses who had never interacted with African Americans.

Neither Eaton nor the Wells team interviewed a statistically valid sample of busing alumni, so skeptics may wonder whether the stories are representative. That worry can now be put to rest. The ethnographic findings of Eaton and Wells et al. have been confirmed by Rucker Johnson, written with Alexander Nazaryan, in the recent book, "Children of the Dream: Why School Integration Works."

An economist, Johnson designed a "natural experiment" in which he ranked the lifetime outcomes of African Americans by the number of years they had attended desegregated schools during the busing era.

In other words, if a district was under a court-ordered busing plan from 1968 to 1980, a child born in 1962 would have experienced desegregation for her full 12 years of schooling, but a child born in 1960, or 1964, would have experienced it for only 10 years. Johnson found that children exposed to desegregation had better lifetime outcomes than children who were not, and those who were exposed for more of their school years had better outcomes than those exposed for fewer.

Johnson’s data show that desegregated African American children completed more years of schooling, including higher rates of college attendance and graduation. As adults, they had higher wages, less poverty and unemployment, greater marital stability and higher family incomes. Their rates of incarceration, heart disease and obesity were lower. In each of these cases, the more years the adults had experienced desegregation, the greater the benefits. For whites, there was no loss on any of these measures from having attended a desegregated school.

But there was a complication: While almost all participants in these programs reported satisfaction and gratitude, the African Americans paid a horrific price in the frequent discrimination, hostility and rejection they had to endure.

They were frequently steered away from Advanced Placement classes, while white students were steered to them, creating a partial internal segregation in purportedly desegregated schools. Kamala Harris told an interviewer that a white friend was prohibited (presumably by her parents) from continuing to play with Harris. The senator says she still finds the incident "very painful emotionally."
The Wells team's and Eaton's black interviewees typically made many white friends, particularly in after-school clubs, sports teams, and student government, but these same friends almost never invited them, or were permitted by parents to invite them, to parties in which white club members routinely participated. As for the sports teams, black students were welcomed in stereotypically black sports (such as basketball), but excluded from teams in sports considered white (such as tennis).

When white parents threatened to pull children out of integrated schools and send them to private schools, administrators pacified them by creating segregated "honors" classes for the whites, excluding black students regardless of ability. Many of the black adults recalled teachers who ignored them in class and abused them verbally with demeaning racial slurs.

One successful black social worker described how a teacher had tried to have her transferred out of the school because the teacher claimed she was mentally retarded. Black students in white schools suffered frequent (what we now term) micro-aggressions from being considered objects of curiosity, some not intentionally hurtful, but hurtful nonetheless -- a white classmate, for example, asking an African-American student why her skin shade was lighter than that of other black students.

And then there were playmates in the black students' home neighborhoods who rejected them and accused them of trying to "act white" when the bused children on appropriate occasions used the standard English with which they had become more comfortable (and which would later be essential for adult success). Some of Eaton's interview subjects reported similar rejection in adult all-black settings. For a small minority of her subjects, the busing experience was, on balance, negative, a permanent assault on their self-esteem.

Systemic insults abounded. Most busing involved taking black children out of their neighborhoods to endure long bus rides. To pacify white parents who would have openly revolted if their children had to go into black neighborhoods, many fewer white children were bused to black schools.

Frequently, the black schools from which children were bused were highly regarded in their communities and children were denied the affirming experience of going to schools that their parents, aunts, and uncles had attended. When white students were bused to a black school in Charlotte, administrators removed hallway photos of the school's retired black educators, to make the white students more comfortable. No similar actions were taken to mask the white identity of schools to which black students were bused.

Yet on balance, the benefits outweighed the trauma, and most black participants in busing thought it worthwhile despite the difficulties. As the black social worker that Wells' team interviewed put it, "On the one hand, I got what I feel like was a very good education, I had been exposed to and was familiar with white students, and had kind of learned how to fit in, and made some friends." But "the flip side is that... pain and suffering you have to endure as a result of the resentment and the anger [of knowing] that these people don't want you there."

A minority of interviewees considered the rejection and hostility so great that they would never put their own children through a similar experience. Unfortunately few had the opportunity to make that choice. Beginning in about 1980, courts released school districts from their obligations to desegregate, and busing largely ended. Schools are now more segregated than at any time since.

Because white and black neighborhoods are so separate, children who developed interracial friendships in the 1970s have had little opportunity to use their learned comfort to develop such friendships as adults. Our assumptions about quality education have shifted dramatically in the last 35 years. In 1980, integration, after-school opportunities, and a supportive school atmosphere were all considered characteristics of a good school.

But only a few years after busing wound down, the Reagan administration published its Nation at Risk report, claiming that the poor public school quality was a national security threat. Since then, we've increasingly come to define a good school solely by its test scores, ignoring that a school's average scores say little about school quality but much about the academic boost that privileged children get outside school (including high quality early childhood, after school, and summer programs, as well as parental literacy support).

Regrettably, from a foolish hope that denunciations of lower test scores in segregated black schools would result in directing more resources to those schools, even many civil right advocates promoted a test-score obsession, leading to adoption of the misguided (and now discredited) No Child Left Behind law in 2002.

An unintended consequence has been the near impossibility of persuading white parents that their children's schools should be desegregated or that they should seek housing in mixed neighborhoods where desegregated schooling was available. This view has become so widely shared that even the white busing alumni who treasure their childhood experiences of desegregation are now unwilling to give their own children the same opportunity. White busing alumni who can choose between a segregated white school with high test scores, and an integrated school where average scores are lower, almost invariably choose the former, although they say they value the latter. As Wells et al. reflected:

It does seem odd that the white graduates of racially mixed high schools, who talk at length about how much they value their experiences at these schools and how much they learned there about living in a racially diverse society, have not felt more impelled to find racially diverse schools for their own children. And, given that so many of them have been professionally and economically successful, one might think that more of them would be critical of the narrow ways in which "good" schools are defined these days.

How can we reverse the surprisingly recent conviction that school quality can be measured by its standardized test scores? Well-intentioned but misguided education policymakers, who insisted on this way of measuring school quality, have made a considerable contribution to the re-segregation of American education. They have a responsibility to undo the damage.

Some school districts today make valiant attempts to implement voluntary desegregation plans. These efforts should be imitated.
elsewhere. If Kamala Harris’s words should ever provoke a more widespread interest in desegregation, we should insist that school administrators have no tolerance for overt discrimination, such as tracking to re-segregate a school, or racially disparate disciplinary practices.

A disturbing revelation of the Wells team’s interviews was that schools undergoing desegregation never talked about it -- race was a forbidden topic and overt or covert discrimination was not discussed or addressed. Nor were efforts made to address explicitly white parents’ fears as well as to react openly and instantly to hostile acts on their part.

It was terribly unfair that African-American students who were so harmed by having to attend segregated schools were the ones who, in the busing era, paid the biggest price, in emotional assaults and practical inconvenience, for access to middle class schools with superior resources and opportunities created by exposure to the dominant racial group.

If we again attempt desegregation on a broad scale, some black parents will want their children to pay this price to gain the enormous benefits that desegregation brings, while other parents will not. This is why, whether we are able to renew a press for school desegregation, we should do the utmost to improve the financing, support services, and other additional resources in the segregated black schools that many African American children, even in the best of conceivable circumstances, will continue to attend.

Greater resources alone can never be sufficient; separate can never be equal. But schools can be less unequal and we have no excuse for tolerating the enormous inequalities that characterize our racially separate schools today.

[*] The Wells team also interviewed 27 Latino, Asian, and mixed race graduates.

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