

# Education

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Bill Barlos for The New York Times

While many communities still resist the busing of black inner city children to white suburban schools, a state plan in Connecticut seems to be working out well. "The longer a town remains in the program, the less fearful and tense it becomes."

## Busing:

### 'You Got Some Nice Things Here, Too'

Busing inner-city black children to suburban schools may still be a scary prospect in many parts of the country where whites believe it would lead to violence, intermarriage and other nightmares of the affluent. But residents of these areas might look to a couple dozen towns in Connecticut where a busing program has been successful and suburban fears of black and Spanish-speaking children were largely dispelled years ago.

Back in 1965, a delegation of Connecticut educators, alarmed at the growing racial imbalance in their schools, went to Washington with a plan for busing inner-city children to the suburbs. A Federal official told them, "You'll never get the suburban towns to take your youngsters unless you have a law that makes them." They never got the law, but they did get a few hesitant Hartford suburbs to try the program, amid much clamor and white parental headshaking.

Today this program, started by Hartford as an experiment and later taken over by the state as a continuing project, involves four cities and 26 suburbs. Called Project Concern, the program buses about 2,000 lower-grade inner-city children—some 40 minutes one way, according to officials—to predominantly white suburban schools.

By now, much of the original panic is a memory. While the program still is not universally liked, there are strong supporters, such as the white teacher in Manchester who said, "Busing is beautiful. How else could my kids get to know kids from the ghetto?"

The children, who are chosen for the program at random—thus assuring a representative cross section of inner-city students—are scattered throughout lower-grade suburban classrooms. Three or four in a classroom is the common rule.

The school integration program may be the most carefully organized and researched in the country—and it doesn't cost the suburbs a cent. Most of the money, about \$1,500 per child, comes through state and Federal grants. The rest is supposed to come from the participating cities—Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury and Bridgeport.

Most of the participating suburbs want to continue. According to Alexander Plante, who dreamed up Project Concern and now oversees it as bureau chief of the state Department of Education: "The longer a town remains in the program, the less fearful and tense it becomes."

Manchester is typical. "It was wild at the beginning," notes Isadore Wolfe, principal of the Green Elementary School and until recently coordinator for Project Concern. The first time the program came up for renewal, the Board of Education meeting was jammed and everybody was shouting. The next year

only one person showed up for the renewal meeting. Each time the board passed the measure overwhelmingly.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are two communities in Fairfield County, Westport and Wilton, where Project Concern has been barely tolerated. A move by angry Westport voters last year to recall Board of Education members who had voted to bus in Bridgeport children was defeated in court. But no one is betting on the program's future.

"Towns like Wilton and Westport," notes a state official who has asked to remain anonymous, "are unusually sophisticated about their bigotry. They can find all kinds of reasons to be against Project Concern without once mentioning race. It is a lot easier to deal with less educated communities—the kind that come right out and say 'niggers.'"

Some of the myths die hard. For example, suburban opponents of Project Concern fear it will end in the "reverse busing" of their children to ghetto schools, an expedient being seriously considered in Michigan and elsewhere. State officials keep denying this; they point out that inner city schools are already overworked and undermanned. "The point of Project Concern," says Dr. Plante, "is not just to integrate, but to educate. We have never recommended reverse busing."

Similarly, some white suburban residents cling to the notion that black parents oppose integration and are being "forced" to send their children to the suburbs. But nearly all inner-city parents whose children have been picked for Project Concern have given their consent and hundreds more have asked to be placed on the waiting list.

The conviction among many blacks that their children will get a better education in suburbia may be grounded in the old and unfortunate shibboleth that "white is right"; nevertheless it seems confirmed by test results. "We found," Dr. Plante said last week, "that the Project Concern child has a three times better chance of achieving well in reading and arithmetic than does his counterpart in the city."

Tests also indicate that the academic performance of suburban children is not affected by the presence of inner-city children in the classroom.

White partisans of Project Concern tend to speak of person-to-person benefits more often than the educational advantages. "The children form close friendships," notes Helen Martin, coordinator of the program in Wilton. "They do a lot of overnight and weekend visiting."

If the experience of Project Concern is any indication, then inner-city children really are different from suburban children in certain respects. They prefer extra portions of hamburgers to a second helping of ice cream; they know the value of money; they tend to be afraid of dogs and other animals.

Recently a small Wilton boy was loudly envying his black friend from Bridgeport. "Boy, are you lucky," he said, "You live in a place with elevators, and you can walk to the candy store any time you want."

"That's all right," the other boy said consolingly. "You got some nice things here, too."  
—RICHARD J. MARGOLIS  
Mr. Margolis is a freelance who frequently writes about education and racial questions.

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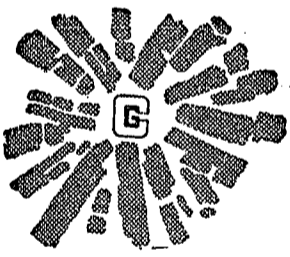
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