

CHAPTER ONE

The Long Movement Outside the South

*Fighting for School Desegregation
in the “Liberal” North*

— FOR ADINA BACK¹ —

There is a pressing need for a liberalism in the North that is truly liberal, that firmly believes in integration in its own community as well as in the deep South.

—Martin Luther King Jr., 1960²

The man'll shoot you in the face in Mississippi, and you turn around he'll shoot you in the back here [in New York].

—Fannie Lou Hamer³

SELMA, MONTGOMERY, BIRMINGHAM—our popular history of the era tells an epic story of a Southern movement born on a Montgomery bus, nurtured in Mississippi jails, and filled with resounding faith and mind-bending courage as ordinary Black citizens braved prison and violence to change the Deep South. Their determined efforts culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and then, a year later, the Voting Rights Act. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks looked on as President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. Moving and heroic, the nationally celebrated narrative of the movement is exclusively Southern.

President Obama and his family traveled to Alabama in March 2015 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery march. But

the president did not journey to New York City in February 2014 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the largest civil rights protest of the decade. On February 3, 1964, nearly half a million students and teachers stayed out of school to challenge the New York City Board of Education's refusal to make a plan for comprehensive desegregation. Obama did not even make a presidential announcement, as he did for the sixtieth anniversary of Rosa Parks's bus arrest, to mark the anniversary. The movement commemorated was depicted only in the South.

Southern cities such as Montgomery, Birmingham, Memphis, and Atlanta, in fact, now market themselves partly through civil rights tourism—at times right alongside Confederate tourism, as in the case of Montgomery. But come to New York, Boston, or Detroit and historical markers to local civil rights movements are hard to find. The country, then and now, fixated on the problem in the South, framing racial injustice as a regional sickness rather than a national malady. Many Northern whites at the time encouraged this focus on the South, preferring to advocate change below the Mason–Dixon Line rather than in their own backyards—a tendency many Southerners found hypocritical. Accordingly, the “real” movement was taking place in the South—and that is what we remember and celebrate today.

Yet tens of thousands of people were active in civil rights struggles outside the South, from the 1940s to the 1980s. Movements in Northern cities, like those in their Southern counterparts, used many tactics—non-violent civil disobedience and marches, meetings with city officials and disruptive direct action, boycotts and door-to-door canvassing. They took on redlining and housing segregation, school segregation, job exclusion, discriminatory public services, welfare exclusion, police brutality, and criminalization. And these movements were repeatedly met with similar claims, from public officials and citizens alike: this is not the South; we don't have that kind of racism here; disparities exist because Black people haven't adopted the right behaviors for success. Northern activists struggled to have their efforts recognized and taken seriously—and that same problem is reflected in our popular histories, which again background these movements.

In the popular imagination, *Brown v. Board* is posited as a challenge only to Southern school systems; resistance to the decision is pictured in

the form of Southerners from Little Rock to Birmingham, not as Northern mothers, politicians, and parent groups, who also labored mightily to ensure that school desegregation would not come to their schools as well. “Boston's busing crisis” is treated very differently from white resistance to the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; there is almost no recognition of the three-decades-long civil rights movement in Boston, which led to the 1974 judicial order for system-wide desegregation. When the actions of Northern Black people appear in popular tributes to the era, they tend to show up in the later 1960s, in the form of the riots and a naïve King discovering Northern Black issues, or as a contrast drawn between groups like the Black Panther Party and the Southern movement. Such framings reinforce the idea that Northern Black people were of a different character and didn't engage in sustained organizing, and that Black Power emerged out of nowhere. A distorted view of the era, these public accounts miss nonviolent, disruptive struggles from New York to Boston to Los Angeles that took place concurrently with those in the South, and the massive efforts of political leaders and white citizens to dismiss the movements and blame Black people for the conditions of their schooling, neighborhoods, and law enforcement.

And so, fifty years later, a parade of memorials pays tribute to the movement only in the South. This is particularly curious, given an avalanche of scholarship over the past two decades that has dramatically documented the vibrancy of movements outside the South.⁴ Given the ways the public fable has grown more prominent at a time when scholarship documenting Northern racism and Black organizing outside the South has dramatically departed from this narrative, the political uses of ignoring the North come into view. There was no national honor or memorial event for the 1964 school boycott, perhaps because the movement did not prevail, and New York City never comprehensively desegregated its schools. To recognize the long movement in New York and Boston to desegregate schools would have opened a much more uncomfortable set of questions on the limits of Northern liberalism and the pervasive nature of school segregation. It would disrupt the happy ending and challenge the easy morality tale the fable gives us—of Northern good guys who went South to support the movement—and show how white Northerners disparaged and quelled movements in their own backyards.

Grappling with this larger landscape of segregation and struggle in the “liberal” North—and with the variety of “good guys” who helped justify and hide injustice in their own cities—brings into sharp relief the national character of American apartheid. Focusing on the North also makes clear that there was nothing accidental or “de facto” (or simply, in fact) about Northern segregation. As historian Matthew Lassiter documents, the framework of “de facto” segregation (as compared to “de jure,” or by law) was created to appeal to Northern sensibilities, to make a distinction between the segregation so evident in many Northern cities from the segregation many Northerners decried in the South. Thus Northern “de facto” segregation was cast outside the law, despite the many government policies that supported and legalized these practices (and judges from Boston to California would find intentional segregation in these school districts as well). Many scholars and journalists since the 1960s have clung to this false distinction between a Southern “de jure” segregation and a Northern “de facto” segregation, making Northern segregation more innocent and missing the various ways such segregation was supported and maintained through the law and political process.⁵

At the same time, looking carefully at these Northern movements reveals how hard community activists fought—not just in the South but across the country—to unveil and challenge segregation and racial inequality. Alongside their Southern counterparts, Black people and their allies built movements from the Northeast to the Midwest to the West to challenge inequality. Courage and relentlessness ran from Birmingham to Boston, Little Rock to Los Angeles. Confronting the extent of the Northern struggle, as Newark activist and historian Komozi Woodard explains, is to see “how much we loved our children.” Black parents and community members built movements to challenge school segregation and inequality, protest housing segregation, confront police brutality, highlight job and union exclusion, and equalize public and social services. They took on cultural arguments blaming Black families and children for the conditions of their neighborhoods and schools, and relentlessly worked to pressure city officials for equity. Trying tactic after tactic to get change, they innovated strategies, shamed city officials, disrupted municipal life, and labored to bridge class and ideological divisions. They were red-baited and smeared, and they persisted—like their Southern counterparts. But their stories are much less publicly known.

“WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT THE POOR CHILDREN RIGHT HERE?”: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN NEW YORK CITY

On February 3, 1964, more than 460,000 students and teachers stayed out of school to protest the New York City Board of Education’s refusal to create a comprehensive school desegregation plan. Bigger even than the 1963 March on Washington, New York’s school boycott was the culmination of a decade of work by Northern organizers such as the Reverend Milton Galamison and Ella Baker, along with Black parents including Mae Mallory and Viola Waddy, who demanded an equal education for their children. And it was the result of a decade of delay, obfuscation, and obstructionism by New York City leaders and white New Yorkers who might have praised the *Brown* decision but didn’t think it applied to them.⁶

A decade earlier, the Supreme Court had handed down its ruling in *Brown v. Board* outlawing segregation in schools, determining that separate could never be equal and laying out a promise of equal education: “In these days it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” Northern Black people, like their Southern counterparts, rejoiced in the ruling, hoping it would bring change to their segregated and unequal schools. Schools educating Black children in New York were heavily overcrowded and decrepit, with underqualified teachers (in many Black schools, most of the teachers were substitutes) and often lacking in sufficient materials or up-to-date facilities.

Since the 1930s, government-made Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) maps had sought to expand home ownership by creating a neighborhood ratings system to encourage bank lending and real estate development. Every neighborhood was rated from A to D, with D neighborhoods marked in red and deemed unsafe for loans and development to encourage bank lending and real estate development. These ratings were based not just on the quality of housing stock but also on racial homogeneity and room for further business development. So, neighborhoods in New York with more than 5 percent Black people, according to historian Craig Wilder’s research, were given C and D ratings.⁷ As a result, this government-sponsored process of facilitating development and home loans rewarded suburban development and white New Yorkers while trapping Black and

Puerto Rican people into certain neighborhoods in the city, limiting investment in those neighborhoods and maintaining school segregation.⁸

Between 1940 and 1960, about 2.5 million Black people and nearly a million Puerto Rican people migrated to New York City. They were shut out of many neighborhoods across the city, and Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant schools grew impossibly crowded. Rather than relieve the crowding by zoning schools differently, sending Black students to less crowded white schools, school leaders instituted part-time school days, so two different groups of Black students would attend the same school in staggered succession. Parents found this appalling, viewing it as further evidence of the city's segregationist impulses. Meanwhile, students of color were regularly channeled into vocational or trade schools and classes, and college options were limited. Part of the issue was also hiring discrimination. Black and Puerto Rican teachers were hired at much lower rates than were white teachers. The hiring process included an oral, in-person test designed to weed out people with "foreign" or "Southern" accents, which led to the screening out of most Black and Puerto Rican candidates.⁹

A variety of New Yorkers, some more typically associated with Southern struggles, took on New York's segregated schools. Before *Brown*, New York-based organizer Ella Baker and Black psychologist and researcher Kenneth Clark had pointed out the deep inequities and visible segregation in New York's schools, and they pressured the city to make good on *Brown*'s mandate. Clark's research, in which he studied the doll preferences of Black children in South Carolina, illustrated the harms of segregation. His experiments became famous when they were cited in the *Brown* decision, but, according to historian Adina Back, "some of his most poignant, though lesser known research with black children and the ways they saw white dolls as smarter and more beautiful came from his work with Northern black children."¹⁰ After the Supreme Court's decision, Clark and Baker pressed harder—determined that New York would have to comply and desegregate its schools as well.

Ella Baker had grown up in Norfolk, Virginia, and attended Shaw University. After graduation, in 1927, she moved to Harlem, where she worked in a variety of community organizations. In 1940, she began working with the NAACP, serving as the NAACP's director of branches from 1943 to 1946, but she left the position because she saw the organization

as too hierarchical and not committed to the work of its branches. Baker remained active in the NAACP, heading its Harlem branch in 1952 and moving the office to the heart of Harlem to embed it in the community. Baker believed in the importance of local leadership and in empowering people to "participate in the decisions over their lives."¹¹ In the face of New York City's stonewalling on desegregation in the mid-1950s, she traveled throughout the city urging parents to see that they could be involved and could insist that their children's rights were recognized.

Like its Southern counterparts, New York City did not want to desegregate its schools after *Brown*. But it pursued a different strategy than outright resistance. The city's board of education (BOE) adopted an integration resolution that did *not* call on schools to move toward desegregation or craft a plan for how that would proceed; rather, the board formed a committee to investigate what action might or might not be necessary.¹²

The Board of Education of the City of New York is determined to accept the challenge implicit in the language and spirit of the decision of the United States Supreme Court. . . . We believe that an effective method for obtaining these ends is to set up a Commission of the Board of Education charged with the responsibility of determining the facts and recommending whatever further action is necessary to come closer to the ideal, viz., the racially integrated school.¹³

In other words, New York celebrated the importance of the *Brown* decision but then cast the Supreme Court's mandate as not necessarily applying to the city's schools. "New York City didn't act right after the '54 decision. It didn't have any reason to act, so you had to help it to realize it," noted Baker.¹⁴ School officials purposely sidestepped the fact that the ways they zoned schools produced overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly Black schools—and cast the issue of segregation as something beyond its control. The commission would investigate whether there was anything to be done. In part to deflect criticism by Baker and Clark, the two were invited to be part of this newly established commission to study the problem.

New York City was invested in depicting its own segregation in terms that were different from those applied to schools in the South. New York Superintendent of Schools William Jansen directly instructed his staff to

refer to the city's segregated schools as "separate" or "racially imbalanced." He explained: "The use of the word 'segregation' in releases is always unfortunate." Jansen directly attacked Kenneth Clark's charges of systemic segregation in New York schools. "In Kenneth Clark's allegation, he alleges that we deliberately segregated children which is false . . . [and] implies that racial segregation exists in our schools. There is no justification for charging this to our schools."¹⁵ The board repeatedly claimed that whatever segregation existed was merely the result of housing segregation, and that it was powerless to do anything. As Jansen explained it, New York's segregation was "natural" and not caused by anyone in the city: "We did not provide Harlem with segregation. We have natural segregation here. It's accidental."¹⁶ According to school officials, people just chose to live with their own. Clark's public critique of the segregated nature of New York schools was dismissed by school officials, including Jansen, who questioned Clark's Americanism as a way to discredit his criticisms.

As criticisms mounted from community leaders about his lack of leadership on desegregation, Jansen defended himself: "I know that my friendliness and respect for the Negro people is as great as that of anyone in the school system."¹⁷ Public officials invested in maintaining the status quo saw how language mattered, and thus deliberately tried to use different words to describe what was happening in New York's schools; along with labeling segregation "racial imbalance" and "separation," they referred to New Yorkers opposed to desegregation as parents committed to "neighborhood schools" and opposed to "forced busing."¹⁸ At the same time, they labeled Black students and their parents as "culturally deprived" and not possessing the proper cultural values and practices for success.

The concept of Northern segregation as "de facto"—in contrast to the "de jure" segregation found in the South—was perhaps the slipperiest and most long-lasting way of masking the intentional nature of school segregation in Northern cities. Partly an effort to appease Northern sensibilities and mark certain forms of segregation as innocent, Northern segregation had come to be termed "de facto." As Black lawyer Paul Zuber, who litigated cases in New York and New Jersey, wrote in 1963:

The word *de facto segregation* was never heard until the historic Supreme Court decision of 1954. . . . Now the law is clear, segregation by legislative act was illegal and in violation of the Constitution of the

United States. Now the North needed a rationalization to continue its brand of racial segregation.¹⁹

This renaming by New York officials was strategic, because it acknowledged what was obvious to the eye—that New York City's schools were resolutely segregated—but claimed it was the case merely in "fact" not "law" (and thus not due to state action). As historian Matthew Lassiter explains, "A broad spectrum of white actors seized upon the 'de facto' rationale through a 'color blind' discourse that defended neighborhood schools and segregated housing as the products of private action and free-market forces alone, a sphere in which government had not caused and therefore had no right or obligation to remedy." It became a way of describing Northern segregation that placated Northern sensibilities and required no action—despite ample evidence, Lassiter explains, "of comprehensive State action in producing deeply entrenched patterns of residential and educational segregation."²⁰ Trying to appeal to city leaders, some activists began to use the term as well to press their cause—unwittingly giving force to a specious distinction between Northern and Southern segregation that city officials were eager to exploit.

The city commissioned the independent Public Education Association to do the study. The PEA concluded that, on average, facilities in predominantly Black and Puerto Rican schools were older, had fewer adequate classrooms and materials, and were not maintained as well as facilities of predominantly white schools.²¹ Nonetheless, it stuck to the board's framing of "separation" and not "segregation." In its assessment of the BOE's responsibility, it adopted a tone sympathetic to the challenges that school administrators faced, as if zoning were created by some far-away potentate and not New York City officials: "To suggest that these lines be drawn to consider the possibility for integration is to make more difficult that which is already too difficult."²² By placing the responsibility for deciding whether the schools were morally bound to zone for integration in the realm of social philosophers, rather than at the feet of the school officials who had done the zoning, it provided the city an effective escape hatch.

The board's commission on integration was charged with creating a plan to implement the PEA report; Ella Baker served on its subcommittees on zoning and teacher placement, the two most controversial

groups. The subcommittees found that BOE policy—specifically the way zoning lines had been drawn and teachers placed—directly contributed to the city's school segregation. When it recommended dramatic changes to the city's zoning and teacher placement policy, the BOE and other city leadership rejected the proposal.

Black parents and local activists had rejoiced at the *Brown* decision, believing it would finally result in change in the city's schools. With the city's stonewalling, however, they began to turn to more direct protest. Meanwhile, the national NAACP in the decade after the *Brown* decision was focused largely on the South. "They were always talking about the poor people down South," lamented Ella Baker, who ran Harlem's NAACP in the 1950s. "And so the question was, what do you do about the poor children right here?"²³

In September 1957, seeking to draw attention to the fact that another school year was starting without any comprehensive desegregation plan, Baker helped organize a picket of over five hundred Black and Latino parents in front of city hall. Calling themselves Parents in Action, the group spearheading the picket drew parent activists from across the city. They demanded the end of the "neighborhood school" concept if it got in the way of desegregating and getting more experienced teachers, smaller class sizes, and an end to part-time school days.²⁴

At a 1957 public hearing on school integration, Black parent-activist Mae Mallory asserted that the Harlem public school her daughter attended was "just as 'Jim Crow' as the Hazel Street School that I attended in Macon, Georgia."²⁵ Mallory was part of a growing parents' movement. "We were trying to shame New York because they would always talk about the South and segregation, when their hands were dirty too."²⁶ She objected to the ways New York officials tried to portray themselves as so very different from their Southern counterparts.

Conditions were miserable. Historian Adina Back interviewed Mallory in 2000 about her experiences in trying to get change at her child's school, PS 10 in Harlem. Mallory recounted how shocked she was by the dirt and stench she encountered there. "There were only two bathrooms for sixteen hundred kids. They were very old fashioned, with one single wood sheet that went from one end of the place to the other with holes cut in it. You couldn't flush it. So whatever the children did, it had to stay there until the next time the water came to flush. And that made the school

smell terrible."²⁷ Mallory found conditions intolerable and took her case to Albany, where she spoke about "the miserable condition of P.S. 10. They were not prepared for this angry Black woman. Brand new toilets were put in immediately."²⁸

For her efforts to address the situation, Mallory told Back, school officials cast her as "dangerous." A school representative "stood in the doorway with her arms akimbo, and she told me that Mr. Principal told her to keep me out of the school." Hardly one to be dissuaded, Mallory confronted the principal directly: "I explained that he had to have contempt for the children because I'm sure that he didn't want to be there under those conditions. And it seems that the Board of Education had contempt for him to put him there."²⁹ After her son Keefer, a fifth grader, came home with an assignment to count the pipes under the sink, Mallory confronted her children's teachers about their low expectations of their students. The teacher bristled: "Are you questioning my integrity as a teacher?" recounted Mallory. "So I told her you god damn right. Are you challenging my integrity as a parent? This child isn't a moron. What does he need to count pipes under the sink for? The teacher answered, 'How do you know he is not going to be a plumber.'" This incident propelled Mallory to get involved in the school's curriculum and ultimately to file a suit against the BOE, "the first suit in the North against *de facto* segregation."³⁰

Mallory became part of a group of mothers who came to be known as the Harlem Nine. They kept their kids out of school in the fall of 1958 to protest the segregated, unequal schools their children had been assigned to.³¹ The mothers had been told their kids were culturally deprived, and that was why they didn't learn—not that their schools were unequal. The women were determined to fight back against the ways they and their kids were being blamed for the substandard education. In 1956, twelve mothers in Harlem formed the Parents Committee for Better Education, which would grow to hundreds and challenge the New York City Board of Education to improve the resources and conditions at Harlem's schools.

These nine mothers took decisive action, according to Mallory, to "demand a fair share of the pie, that our children be educated the same way as everybody else's."³² They had tried to get the city to take their grievances seriously, but getting nowhere, they decided to pull their kids out of these schools to homeschool them. The city still didn't care—and the mothers

decided to stop schooling them entirely. "We will go to jail and rot there, if necessary, but our children will not go to Jr. High Schools 136, 139, or 120," Viola Waddy explained.³³ Some of the mothers, including Bernice Skipworth and Shirley Rector, lived in Harlem's Lincoln Houses. The *Amsterdam News* called them the "Little Rock Nine of Harlem." Challenging school officials who tried to cast them as the problem, these mothers asserted a "responsible" motherhood by seeking equality for their children. Adina Back explains: "Their sense of entitlement extended beyond the boundaries of class, race and gender as they described their activism as the struggle for human rights."³⁴

The city brought the nine mothers up on charges for failure to comply with compulsory education requirements. At the time, the FBI was heavily monitoring Mallory's actions and those of the other Harlem Nine mothers. According to historian Ashley Farmer, despite Mallory's organizing activities with the Communist Party, "it doesn't appear that the Bureau really took notice of her until she began organizing with school desegregation groups and with the Harlem 9. This suggests that she was more of a threat to them as a grassroots leader than as a participant in other kinds of CP activities."³⁵

A young Black lawyer, Paul Zuber, defended the Harlem Nine and represented Mallory in her suit against the New York City Board of Education. Zuber, who'd grown up in Harlem and attended Brown University and Brooklyn Law School, was fearless. "He moves like a Sherman Tank where others fear to tread," the *Chicago Defender* observed.³⁶ Zuber called out the racism of New York alongside that of the South: "Down home [in the South], our bigots come in white sheets. Up here, they come in Brooks Brothers suits and ties."³⁷ The cases against the mothers ended up in two courtrooms. Judge Lewis Kaplan found four of them guilty of violating state compulsory education law. But Judge Justine Polier refused to find Skipworth and Rector guilty, dismissing their charges and citing their "constitutionally guaranteed right to elect no education for their children rather than subject them to discriminatorily inferior education."³⁸

When the city decided to appeal Polier's decision, the Reverend Gardner Taylor—the only African American member of the BOE—was disgusted by the city's desire to punish those who highlighted New York's segregation: "Never again can the City of New York rebuke or admonish any other section of the country on this question, the board has . . . now

made it one nation indivisible, with little difference between New York and Little Rock."³⁹ Ultimately, the board dropped the appeal, but segregation in the city's schools remained.

In fact, as in other Northern cities, segregation *worsened* in New York City schools in the decade after *Brown*, particularly in response to large-scale Black and Puerto Rican migration to the city. As the civil rights leader Milton Galamison told the board in 1958, "It is alarming to observe that over so long a period of time, and in the face of so many resolutions, not a single Negro school in Brooklyn has been desegregated; that the number of segregated junior high schools has increased from 17 to 25; and that the pattern of segregation is rising rather than diminishing."⁴⁰ Galamison had grown up in Philadelphia, attended Lincoln University and Princeton University, and become pastor of Siloam Presbyterian Church in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in 1949.⁴¹ He was clear the goal was much more than a seat for a Black child next to a white one: "The Negro wants integration into American life in terms of jobs, in terms of education, in terms of the ability to really partake of the fruits and advantages of American society. He doesn't want to sacrifice, however, being a Negro. . . . Short of his participation in the mainstream of American life in terms of the same education that everyone is getting, in terms of the same kind of housing that everyone else is getting, and in terms of the same kind of employment that everyone else is getting, he can't have any kind of equality."⁴² Galamison's relentlessness made political leaders and journalists nervous. As biographer Clarence Taylor notes, one of Galamison's greatest contributions was "making many New Yorkers aware of the duplicity of New York City's established liberal elite."⁴³

Black parents pushed on. They formed separate parent organizations when they were excluded from official school Parent Teacher Associations and tried to break through the doublespeak and bureaucracy that New York City officials employed to protect their segregated and unequal schools. They also sought to demonstrate their commitment to their children's education and to challenge the ways many teachers and school administrators treated them and their children as the problem. School officials often deflected protests highlighting the city's inequalities by casting Black and Latino students as lacking the right cultural values and behaviors for educational success and thus requiring a different sort of education to learn. The term of the time was "cultural deprivation," and so what was needed

was cultural remediation. One white parent spoke it plainly: "Clean up the Jungle Homes and you won't have Blackboard Jungle Children; sending them to other schools won't change their stripes."⁴⁴ Vehemently denying any racism, many residents of the city's white communities laid claim to "their" neighborhood schools and decried the "crime" and "cultural deprivation" of other communities, which they said caused the lack of success of children living there. They weren't racist, residents claimed, but they simply didn't want their children "bused." Teachers in schools in white communities often echoed these ideas, referring to students from Black communities as "problem children" who suffered from "cultural handicaps" and came from "culturally deprived homes."⁴⁵

Indeed, the rhetoric of "neighborhood schools" and "busing" originated in struggles to oppose desegregation. White parents didn't talk about their schools as "neighborhood schools" or profess the value of the "neighborhood school" until they were faced with the possibility of desegregation, as historian Matthew Delmont demonstrates.⁴⁶ Similarly, few white parents were opposed to putting their kids on school buses—and indeed did so without complaint—until those buses were used for desegregation. In 1972, the US Commission on Civil Rights reached that conclusion, pointing out that the school bus had been a "friendly figure in the North" for fifty years.⁴⁷

Alongside a growing Black parents' movement, there had long been white teachers who saw the scourge of segregation in New York and tried to demand change from the BOE. Most were called Communists for their trouble and marginalized, and many were fired. Some of these teachers had gotten their start in multiracial movements or labor organizations affiliated with the Communist Party, and some had no connection to the Communist Party whatsoever—regardless, it was considered a "red" idea to advocate desegregation. As the *New York Age*, one of the city's African American newspapers, noted in 1952, many of the teachers being labeled subversives were Jewish people who actively worked on behalf of Black students: "Two disturbing facts about the continued firing and suspension of teachers in the Board of Education's drive against subversives are that the ax appears directed primarily at Jews and that most of these teachers have been active in fighting against discrimination and for school improvements among minority groups."⁴⁸

Unlike other organizations of teachers in the city, the radical Teachers Union (TU) had joined Black community calls for teacher rotation (calling for the board of education to establish a policy of rotating better, permanent teachers into Black schools) and increased hiring of Black and Puerto Rican teachers. Such ideas were considered dangerous and possibly seditious, and the TU was resoundingly attacked and rebaited for this work.⁴⁹

Faced with the intransigence of the New York City Board of Education and city leaders, Black parent groups across the city, along with civil rights organizations and white and Puerto Rican activists, moved to a bigger action. Bayard Rustin, one of the key organizers of the 1963 March on Washington, brought his organizing skills to the task. On February 3, 1964, more than 460,000 students and thousands of teachers (about 43 percent of students and 8 percent of teachers) stayed out of school in response to the BOE's unwillingness to formulate a comprehensive school desegregation plan. Many students attended Freedom Schools, created by parents and activists to demonstrate how much students desired an equal and excellent education. Their numbers far outstripped—and nearly doubled—the number of people who had marched in DC in August 1963.

But the protest met with much criticism from the media, little change from the BOE, and no pressure from the federal government.⁵⁰ Many white New Yorkers were aghast at the protests—and stepped up their counter-organizing to ensure that change did not come to New York schools. While newspapers such as the *New York Times* were covering the Southern civil rights movement extensively and sympathetically by 1964, they took a very different, much more critical approach to a growing desegregation movement at home. The BOE initially compiled a list of teachers who had participated in the boycott, and board president James B. Donovan threatened to take into account these teacher absences in considering promotion decisions. The board later retracted the threat—and destroyed its record of participants.⁵¹

Understanding the history of the 1964 New York school boycott requires grappling with the fact that civil rights activists did not succeed in moving public officials to remedy the city's segregated and unequal schools. Quite the contrary, in fact; it was white parents who opposed desegregation who saw their demands recognized. An umbrella group calling itself

Parents and Taxpayers formed to protect New York's segregated "neighborhood schools." While smaller in number than Black protesters, these white parents commanded a great deal of political power both locally and nationally, and garnered a tremendous amount of media attention. A month after the exponentially larger school boycott, more than ten thousand white New Yorkers, 70 percent of them women, marched over the Brooklyn Bridge in the rain to protest a very limited desegregation plan that was to pair forty elementary schools and twenty junior high schools. This white counterprotest was widely and sympathetically covered on the newly emerging television news. "This is the greatest day of my life," said one woman marcher.⁵² TV footage of the protest formed the visual backdrop as Congress debated the Civil Rights Act, and the march succeeded in affecting the structure of the bill.⁵³

Emanuel Celler, a Democratic congressman from Brooklyn, helped ensure a loophole in the 1964 Civil Rights Act that would keep federal enforcement away from—and federal money flowing into—New York's segregated schools. (The law would tie federal funding to school desegregation.) In drafting the act, the bill's Northern and Western sponsors, mindful of their white constituents back home, drew a sharp distinction between segregation by law in the South and so-called "racial imbalance" in the North, amending Title IV, section 401(b), to read: "Desegregation means the assignment of students to public schools and within such schools without regard to their race, color, religion, or national origin, but '*desegregation*' shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance" (emphasis added). In the years after passage of the law, white politicians and parents in Boston, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere regularly pointed to this portion of the Civil Rights Act to justify the maintenance of their segregated schools.⁵⁴ New York City never implemented a comprehensive desegregation plan.

Northern and Western members of Congress purposely kept enforcement away from their own schools, a fact that was clear at the time, even though it has largely been lost to history. Southern politicians noted the hypocrisy of the bill's supporters in carving out the loophole for their own schools. Praising New York's senators as "pretty good segregationists at heart," Mississippi senator James O. Eastland "[did] not blame the two distinguished Senators from New York for their desire to protect New

York City, as well as Chicago, Detroit, and similar areas. But why should they attempt to penalize our part of the country?"⁵⁵ Eastland did not point out this hypocrisy because he cared about Northern Black students' educations, yet his observation about how enforcement would come to the South but not the North was sadly on target. Contextualizing why many African American communities rioted the summer after the bill passed, civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin observed, "People have to understand that although the civil rights bill was good and something for which I worked arduously, there was nothing in it that had any effect whatsoever on the three major problems Negroes face in the North: housing, jobs, and integrated schools . . . the civil-rights bill, because of this failure, has caused an even deeper frustration in the North."⁵⁶

In the years following the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW, now the Department of Health and Human Services), the federal office charged with enforcing school desegregation policies, lacked the political support and resources needed to successfully hold Northern cities accountable for school segregation. HEW's limitations placed the burden of proving that Northern schools were intentionally segregated largely on Black parents and civil rights lawyers.⁵⁷ The task of school desegregation would not fall equally across the nation—many Northern cities would never be forced to desegregate their persistently separate and unequal schools. But that history finds no place in fiftieth-anniversary commemorations.

So if the nation was going to mark New York's 1964 school boycott, a number of uncomfortable truths would have to be confronted: First, that there was a long-standing, diverse movement challenging New York City's unequal and segregated school system, but many New Yorkers—including city leaders, journalists, and ordinary citizens—engaged in myriad actions to thwart and demonize it. Second, one of the most important pieces of civil rights legislation ever passed in the United States—the 1964 Civil Rights Act—was purposely designed to keep school desegregation away from the North. And finally, despite decades of efforts by Black parents and civil rights activists, the struggle against school segregation did not succeed, and many school districts, including New York's, never comprehensively desegregated.⁵⁸ But that more sordid version of the era finds little place in our public imagination or national self-interest because it

would require reckoning with a much more sobering history and entail more sustained action in the present.

"IT'S NOT THE BUS, IT'S US": THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN BOSTON

In 2014, Boston was poised to mark an important anniversary. That September marked the fortieth anniversary of the implementation of Boston's court-ordered school desegregation, the result of decades of civil rights agitation in the city. The vast majority of articles and events on the anniversary of the so-called "Boston busing crisis," however, commemorated the city's "troubles" with busing, and not the twenty-five-year Black struggle that compelled the city to face its own entrenched racial inequality. As they had done forty years earlier, most city officials, citizens, and journalists ignored the three decades of Black organizing against segregation and educational inequality that had led to the federal case, *Morgan v. Hennigan*, and Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr.'s far-reaching 1974 decision. By sidestepping this history and the racial inequality that had long defined Boston, they framed "busing" as difficult for everyone in the city and thus a collective—and perhaps unnecessary—trauma.

Bostonians have long refused to face the city's record of ingrained racism. Before the 2017 Super Bowl between the New England Patriots and Atlanta Falcons, controversy erupted when *Saturday Night Live* "Weekend Update" co-anchor Michael Che quipped, "I just want to relax . . . and watch the blackest city in America beat the most racist city I've ever been to." Despite escalating criticism, Che refused to back down. *Boston Globe* columnist Renee Graham defended him: "Perhaps a solid first step will be for people to be as outraged by the racism that clings to Boston like a second skin as they are by a comedian who had the audacity to call it out."⁵⁹

Framing the issue around "busing" has long been a way to maintain that silence and to cover up the pervasive, state-sponsored segregation in the city and the decades-long movement that sought to challenge it. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, liberal journalists, political leaders, and white parents employed the idea of "forced busing" to evade public responsibility for Boston's deeply inequitable and segregated school system and to foreground the perspectives of white constituents who wanted a more acceptable way to explain their opposition to desegregation. It has become

one of the few ways Northern race relations enter school textbooks—with "Boston's busing crisis" treated as different from the struggles to desegregate Little Rock's public schools. Through this framing, the inequality of Boston's schools was obscured and court-ordered desegregation in Boston was treated as perhaps unnecessary; racism in Boston was reduced to class alienation and ethnic parochialism of working-class white people who simply sought to protect "their neighborhood schools," instead of systemic racial inequality broadly supported in the city's schools, policing, housing, and jobs.

A fuller history of Boston's court-ordered desegregation has to begin decades before the NAACP's case came before Judge Garrity. From its formation in 1950, the Boston NAACP's public school subcommittee sought to demonstrate the segregated nature of the city's schools but faced opposition from whites and some Black people over whether segregation even existed in the northern city. As NAACP subcommittee leader and longtime activist Ruth Batson explained, "We were 'raising a false issue.'"⁶⁰ A mother of three kids, Batson had become active when she discovered a white friend's kids had science in school but her daughters didn't. She called the NAACP to report the problem but was told that the organization didn't have a subcommittee on education. The next day, the NAACP called her back and asked her to chair one. She said yes, and her life "changed profoundly."

The NAACP subcommittee saw firsthand that keeping Black students in separate facilities was a way for the Boston School Committee, the elected body that runs the Boston Public Schools (BPS), to provide Black students with an inferior education. Six of the city's nine predominantly Black elementary schools were overcrowded. Four of the district's thirteen Black schools had been recommended for closure for health and safety reasons, while eight needed repairs to meet city standards.⁶¹ Per pupil spending averaged \$340 for white students but only \$240 for Black students. Teachers at predominantly Black schools were more likely to be substitutes and often less experienced than those assigned to white schools. The curriculum at many Black schools was outdated and frequently blatantly racist, and the school district overwhelmingly tracked Black students into manual arts and trade classes, rather than college-preparatory ones. The school district also segregated through pupil assignment policies that fed Black students into high school in ninth grade and whites in tenth—and often

into different junior high schools before that. "You could live on the same street and have a white neighbor, as I did," parent-activist Ellen Jackson explained, "and you went to one junior high school and she went to another junior high school. . . . It was not de facto at all."⁶² In addition to the racial gerrymandering of attendance zones (many schools were located at the edges of irregularly shaped districts and were not the "neighborhood schools" they were professed to be), the Boston School Committee reserved the overwhelming majority of jobs for white applicants through racially discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. Many schools had no Black faculty (Black educators made up only one half of 1 percent of the city's teachers), and there were no Black principals in the system.⁶³ As in New York, the struggle for desegregation in Boston was about educational equality and jobs.

According to Batson, in the years following the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, "Northern states were very smug" and did not think the decision applied to them.⁶⁴ In the early 1960s, the Boston NAACP tried to persuade the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) to recognize the existence of racial segregation in Boston's schools. But MCAD refused, claiming that racial segregation was not a problem in the city. While the existence of public commissions such as MCAD seems to attest to a more open racial climate in Massachusetts and did provide openings at other junctures for advancement, its unwillingness to investigate institutions such as the Boston Public Schools—and its proclamation that they were, to the contrary, *not segregated*—protected the city's discriminatory practices.

The NAACP responded by taking its case en masse to the Boston School Committee in June 1963. Supporters packed the hearing, while more than eight hundred congregated outside the building singing freedom songs.⁶⁵ Saying it was "too late for pleading," Ruth Batson laid out the NAACP's fourteen-point program, decrying the existence of "de facto segregation," curriculum bias, and tracking and hiring discrimination in BPS.⁶⁶ In response, according to Batson, "we were insulted. We were told our kids were stupid and this was why they didn't learn."⁶⁷

To continue the pressure on the Boston School Committee, Black community leaders turned to direct action. A week after the hearing, they organized a school boycott and nearly half of the city's Black high school

students stayed out of school, participating in Freedom Schools instead.⁶⁸ The school committee then agreed to a second hearing with the NAACP, but shut the meeting down when civil rights leaders used the phrase "de facto segregation." Calling it "a horrible time to live in Boston," Batson explained: "The press came out: NAACP is wrong. . . . We got very little public support and we got absolutely no political support. . . . All kinds of hate mail . . . There were people who could not accept the fact that this horrible thing was happening in Boston."⁶⁹

According to Batson, the subcommittee also found a "general consensus" among principals that Black students did not do as well as white students because "the parents did not seem to care."⁷⁰ Similar to public officials in New York, Boston school officials did not defend segregation on its face, but blamed the problems in Black schools on Black children's motivation and their parents' values. While many of their white Southern counterparts in the 1950s and early 1960s explicitly defended segregation and states' rights, a different lexicon of race emerged in Northern cities like Boston—one that framed white resistance to racial integration in a language of "neighborhood control," "taxpayer's rights," and "forced busing," and cast African American and Latino youth as "problem students" whose "cultural deprivations" hampered their educational success. In 1964, William O'Connor became the new head of the Boston School Committee, declaring, "We have no inferior education in our schools. What we've been getting is an inferior type of student."⁷¹ Fellow school committee member Joseph Lee concurred: "The Negro can make their schools the best in the city if they attend schools more often, on time and apply themselves."⁷² Such cultural arguments blamed Black students and their parents for their educational underattainment and provided a palatable way for Boston's liberal sensibilities to justify disparities in terms different from those applied to the South.

By the mid-1960s, the term "busing" had emerged as a useful political phrase and organizing tool for white Bostonians. School committee member Louise Day Hicks (who later won a city council seat and became the public leader of the antidesegregation movement) played on fears of "forced busing." She characterized those pushing for desegregation as "outsiders," while asserting "there has never been any discrimination in the city of Boston and those who say there is are doing a great disservice

to this great city.”⁷³ Politicians such as Hicks, by employing the disingenuous phrases “forced busing” and “problem students,” helped advance their own political careers and galvanize white support against desegregation.

Children were already being bused to Boston public schools without objection from white parents or politicians—often to *maintain* segregation. But from the early 1960s, white leaders in Boston had found decrying “forced busing” an effective and palatable way to oppose desegregation and were taking more deliberate and costly steps to avoid any desegregation. The Boston School Committee decided to use an old synagogue, Beth El (which cost \$125,000 to buy, \$10,000 to repair, and \$90,000 a year to operate), rather than bus nearly two hundred Black students from the crowded Endicott District to white schools (which would have cost only \$40,000). Claiming that busing was an infringement on the rights of “taxpaying families” (read, white families), the school committee moved to institute double-session days in Black schools, rather than bus Black children from overcrowded schools to white schools—though white children were bused to other white schools to eliminate overcrowding. When Black parents protested the double-session days, the committee gave up the idea but did nothing to alleviate the overcrowding.⁷⁴ In this way, busing in the 1960s was regularly used by the school committee to enable and protect segregated schools. And white parents did *not* object to this sort of busing. By 1972, 85 percent of Boston’s high school students were already being bused—a fact that the media conveniently ignored as it repeatedly validated white opposition to “busing” as the problem.

To appear compliant with federal mandates, Boston passed an open-enrollment policy in 1961, much like the freedom-of-choice plans that popped up across the South in the mid-1960s. Black students were entitled to open seats in white schools. In reality, there were numerous barriers for Black families seeking to actually use open enrollment to access seats in less-crowded, better-resourced schools, while white families sometimes took advantage of it to transfer out of schools in transitional neighborhoods. The school committee forbade the use of school funds to bus children to these seven thousand open seats throughout the city, even though students were being bused to maintain segregated schools.

Black parents sought to challenge the idea that they did not care about their children’s education—to counter, as one mother put it, the school committee’s “ideas as to what they’d do with our ‘poor, culturally deprived

children.”⁷⁵ In 1965, Black parents led by Ellen Jackson took the unprecedented step of creating Operation Exodus, in which they paid for buses to take their children to schools with open seats in other parts of the city. Parents believed that if they began busing Black students to these open seats, they would shame the school district into complying with the state law and taking over the operation and funding of the buses. According to Batson, Operation Exodus parents “gave lie to the stereotypes applied to them: ‘deprived . . . lack of education interest . . . laziness . . . lack of ambition and worse, ‘a disregard for their children’s education.’”⁷⁶ But school officials continued to exhibit a disregard for their children’s educational futures. Despite publicly celebrating Operation Exodus in an effort to look compliant and racially balanced (the district in fact cited the program in its court filings in its defense), BPS never took over the operation or funding of the program.

As historian Gerald Gill observes, Boston’s escalating protests took place alongside Southern movements: “Boston’s activists were equally determined to confront a powerful and racially insensitive institution and were firmly empowered to press forward, not retreat.”⁷⁷ Other parents and activists took up a variety of strategies to secure educational equity. In 1966, Batson and others formed the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) to enable Black students to attend suburban schools. In addition, by the late 1960s, some parents and community leaders had formed independent Black schools, such as the Highland Park Free School, Roxbury Community School, and the New School. Meanwhile, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black students in more than a dozen high schools had staged school boycotts and walkouts to protest school disciplinary and dress-code policies, a lack of Black teachers and administrators, the need for Black studies, and the need for an independent assessment of patterns of segregation in the city. By pressing for an independent study of racial patterns within city schools, students clearly were aware of the difficulty community activists and adult leaders had been having in establishing the problem of system-wide segregation with the Boston School Committee and took up the fight.⁷⁸

Latino children experienced similar problems. Excluded and underserved in BPS, five thousand Latino students, according to a 1970 report, were systematically excluded from school completely. Language barriers (including the lack of bilingual education), inadequate teachers and

counselors, dilapidated buildings, shortages of books and other materials, and racist curricula meant that Latino students were receiving a separate and distinctly unequal education. Latino students were treated as deficient and were regularly cast as the problem in discourses that were similar to those used against Black students. Latino parents and community groups began to sound the alarm, exposing the problem and pushing for bilingual instruction and access.⁷⁹

After two decades of meetings, rallies, student walkouts, parent organizing efforts, community initiatives, and independent schools, there was still little change in BPS. And so Black parents with the NAACP decided as a last resort in 1972 to file a federal suit against the school committee, *Tallulah Morgan v. James W. Hennigan*. At the time, 59 of the 201 schools in BPS taught the majority of the city's Black students, and only 356 of 4,500 teachers in BPS were Black.⁸⁰ By 1972, there were few neighborhood schools in Boston; 85 percent of high school students in Boston were already being bused, and thousands of white students not ensconced in all-white neighborhoods were bused past Black schools to white schools.⁸¹ In 81 of Boston's 201 schools, no Black teacher had ever been assigned, and another 35 schools had only one Black teacher.⁸² In 1973, the Boston School Committee willingly gave up \$65 million in state and federal funds rather than desegregate schools.⁸³

In June 1974, Judge Garrity found the Boston School Committee had "knowingly carried out a systematic program of segregation affecting all of the city's students, teachers, and school facilities." He explicitly rejected the school committee's rhetoric of protecting "neighborhood schools," citing open enrollment, magnet schools, city-wide schools, and widespread high school feeder programs as "antithetical" to a neighborhood school system. He ordered comprehensive desegregation to begin in September. This included mandates for hiring more Black and Latino teachers, the elimination of the feeder system that sent Black students to high school in ninth grade and white students in tenth, and the desegregation of twenty-three of the sixty-five racially imbalanced schools through school pairings and busing (with schools close to each other, such as Roxbury and South Boston High Schools, paired to minimize busing).⁸⁴ Yet, in extensive coverage of school opening and "busing," many news outlets, including the *Boston Globe*, refused to grapple with Boston's long history of school segregation and the fact that vast numbers of Boston students had already

been bused before "busing." They ignored three decades of Black activism (protests the *Globe* itself had covered over the years) that challenged the structures of segregation in school resources, zoning, hiring practices, and curriculum, as well as the sustained white resistance to desegregation and refusal to follow either state or federal law that had brought the city to this juncture.

In the face of Garrity's order, public officials and journalists repeatedly ignored well-established Black grievances and persistently claimed that systematic segregation did not exist in the Cradle of Liberty. They treated Garrity's decision as surprising and unexpected, with many casting it as extreme and drastically out-of-line. (Garrity received so many death threats that a federal marshal was assigned to protect him.)

Over the summer, white parents had begun organizing a boycott, and many kept their kids home—with the support of a number of Boston City Council members, including Louise Day Hicks, Albert "Dapper" O'Neil, Christopher Iannella, and Patrick McDonough. Each of these council members displayed a letter—R-O-A-R—in the windows of their office, spelling the acronym of the antidesegregation organization Restore Our Alienated Rights, and the council let the group use its chambers to meet. The police union had publicly opposed the court's order, and many police officers were not committed to peaceful and effective school desegregation. According to Batson, many white Bostonians "believed that it all belonged to them, their school, their sidewalk."⁸⁵

The start of school on September 12, 1974, provoked some of the ugliest antidesegregation demonstrations in the history of the civil rights movement, though desegregation happened in many Boston schools without incident. Crowds of whites harassed Black students trying to desegregate white schools, and often their harassment turned violent. Thousands of white families kept their children home rather than send them to a desegregated school. Buses carrying elementary school students were stoned. Nine Black children were injured and eighteen buses were damaged. Black students desegregating South Boston High were met by a mob of whites throwing rocks, bottles, eggs, and rotten tomatoes, yelling "Niggers go home!"⁸⁶ The situation grew worse over the weeks: fights broke out in the schools, and white crowds continued their attacks on Black students and bystanders. The courage of Black students who braved these schools continued as well. "If they run us out of that school, they can run us out of

the city,” one Black student said, explaining her decision to keep attending school despite the violence. “They will be able to stop access wherever they want.”⁸⁷

Most of the city council proudly stood with the resistance, and Boston’s mayor, Kevin White, had committed \$200,000 of city money in a fruitless appeal of Garrity’s order. A month after the school year started in Boston, President Gerald Ford joined in, pronouncing “I respectfully disagree with the judge’s orders”⁸⁸—and Mayor White quickly followed suit. Even though resistance was happening all over the city with support from political leaders all the way to the White House, and though white middle-class neighborhoods known as the High Wards experienced significant racial violence, working-class South Boston was pictured as the problem. It was easier to lay the blame then and even forty years later on working-class South Boston than focus on the middle-class whites who also resisted desegregation and the levers of power that supported and encouraged white opposition to court-ordered desegregation.⁸⁹ Spotlighting the racism of South Boston helped make it seem as though what was happening in Boston wasn’t systemic, despite its similarities to white opposition to desegregation in Little Rock and Birmingham.

Massive organizing and marches by Black residents and their allies in 1974 and 1975 received much less attention in the news. Most of the national media attention focused on white parents and children, not on Black organizers who had spent decades trying to demonstrate how racist Boston was. Black people became bit players in Boston’s most famous civil rights event—even though their organizing continued unabated.

Following the discursive strategies of the time, many historians have continued to treat white Northern opposition to homegrown civil rights movements differently from Southern resistance. While “Southern segregationists” sought to prevent school desegregation, similar movements in Northern cities are often described as “white backlash” or “antibusing movements”; rarely are they termed “segregationist.” Southern white assumptions about the culture and behavior of Blacks are interrogated more vigorously than Northern officials’ explanations of “problem students” and “cultural deprivation.” Historians have treated as calculated and contrived the Southern “surprise” when sit-ins erupted in 1960, but not Northern “surprise” over Garrity’s ruling. The violence and upheaval that accompanied school desegregation in Little Rock (and the federal

intervention it required) is treated as horrible but necessary; in Boston, it is seen as horrible but not quite as necessary. The attempts to “understand” Northern white residents’ overt opposition to desegregation—as historian Ronald Formisano writes, “Thousands of decent, moderate whites across the city [of Boston] cannot be said to have been racists”⁹⁰—reflect the problematic assumption that racism did not pervade Northern consciousness as it did the Southern one.

Such framings reached their height in J. Anthony Lukas’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Common Ground*, which helped engrave the public mythologies of “Boston’s busing crisis” into historical common sense.⁹¹ Still cited as an indispensable source (in 2016, the *New York Times* named it *the* book to read to understand Boston), Lukas’s book examines “Boston’s busing crisis” by tracing the experiences of three Boston families—the working-class Black Twymons, the working-class Irish McGoffs, and the middle-class Yankee Divers—from 1968 to 1978.⁹² Seven years in the writing, *Common Ground* discounted the role of Black leaders and parent activists as key players of the decade and focused on a Black family that was not active in the community and whose children embodied a variety of social ills. The pathological lens through which Lukas viewed the Twymons made enduring educational problems in the city largely the fault of Black culture and behaviors. By framing it as the “busing crisis” and not as massive white resistance—supported by all levels of power—to school desegregation, Lukas’s book rendered understandable Northern white defense of “their neighborhood schools.” It invisibilized what segregation meant in the city, and fit with contemporary political interests to render Northern “busing” (read, desegregation) as perhaps unnecessary and hard on everyone. *Common Ground* continues to be celebrated as “great history”—in ways that a text that normalized the segregationist school practices Southern white families clung to would not be.

The attachment to the busing story follows from an attachment to a story of the civil rights movement as a rousing *Southern* story—one born on the dusty roads of the South, nurtured by noble Southern students, church ladies, and ministers, and concluded with the signing of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts. Struggles for school desegregation that rippled through the North were less rousing: they were met over and over with denials and surprise: this is not the South; we don’t have systemic segregation; we like “our neighborhood schools.” Repeatedly, Black parents and

civil rights activists pressed for desegregation and were told their children were the problem. Repeatedly, school zones were redrawn in ways that maintained segregation, Black and Puerto Rican teaching applicants were screened out, and Black and Latino students tracked into vocational classes, in schools with more policing and punishment. And yet, time and again, activists were asked to prove that there was segregation in these liberal Northern cities.

Increasingly, school segregation came to be interpreted as an interpersonal problem between Blacks and whites, a matter of racial attitudes and who sits next to whom. Questions about fundamental inequalities in education and who benefited from these disparities receded further from the conversation, in a discussion that reduced integration to a seat next to a white child. Alongside local resistance to more substantive desegregation, the US Supreme Court by the 1970s also limited the implementation of *Brown's* promise of equality. In 1973, in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, the Supreme Court reversed a Texas district court's decision that education was a fundamental right that rendered inequalities of school financing constitutionally pressing. While the Supreme Court acknowledged that *Brown* had affirmed that "education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments," it found that "education, of course, is not among the rights afforded explicit protection under our Federal Constitution. Nor do we find any basis for saying it is implicitly so protected." Having ruled that education was not a "fundamental" right or interest, the court maintained that reliance on local property taxes to fund public schools, even while causing significant disparities, was constitutional because local control over schools represented a legitimate state interest.

This decision, in effect, ensured that poorer districts would never receive equal funding to build equal schools—and that having a right to equal protection did not extend to attending an equally funded school. Thurgood Marshall, in his dissent, noted:

that a child forced to attend an underfunded school with poorer physical facilities, less experienced teachers, larger classes and a narrower range of courses than a school with substantially more funds—and thus with greater choice in educational planning—may nevertheless excel is to the credit of the child, not the State. Indeed, who can ever measure

for such a child the opportunities lost and the talents wasted for want of a broader, more enriched education? Discrimination in the opportunity to learn that is afforded a child must be our standard.⁹³

In *Milliken v. Bradley* the next year, the court reversed a district remedy that had created metropolitan superdistricts linking the city of Detroit with its suburbs to remedy the widespread, institutionalized segregation found in Detroit's schools. Despite extensive evidence of the intentional nature of metro Detroit's school segregation, the decision exempted suburban districts from any role in or responsibility for remedying school segregation and subsequently reinforced the existing trend of white flight from city public schools to suburban school districts. Calling the decision "a giant step backwards" from *Brown* and an "emasculat[ion] of our constitutional guarantee of equal protection of the laws," Thurgood Marshall in his dissent observed, "Notwithstanding a record showing a widespread and pervasive racial segregation . . . this Court holds that the District Court was powerless to require the State to remedy its constitutional violation in any meaningful fashion . . . thereby guaranteeing that Negro children in Detroit will receive the same separate and inherently unequal education in the future as they have been unconstitutionally afforded in the past."⁹⁴

Rodriguez and *Milliken* had far-reaching consequences for school children in suburban, urban, and rural areas, as they sheltered inequality through a legal claim of local preference and control. Alongside the ways President Ford and mainstream news outlets naturalized the resistance to Boston's court-ordered desegregation, this spelled an end to any substantial national commitment to school desegregation and provided comfort to those who wanted to preserve the "quality" of "their schools" by denying access to other children.

Racial inequities in schooling have continued to widen in the four decades since *Milliken*. In 2007, the Supreme Court, in *Community Schools v. Seattle*, went a step further. Asserting that *Brown's* goal had long since been realized and even voluntary school desegregation programs in Seattle and Louisville were an "extreme approach," it struck down these programs as "more faithful to the heritage of *Brown*." The fable made flesh, Justice John Roberts explained the court's decision: "When it comes to using race to assign children to schools, history will be heard. . . . It was not the inequality of the facilities but the fact of legally separating children

based on race on which the Court relied to find a constitutional violation in that case [*Brown*].” Ignoring the explicit language of the *Brown* decision that “the right of the opportunity of an education . . . must be made available to all on equal terms,” the court stated that *Brown* had only sought to address the use of race in school assignment rather than the ways the use of race was a mechanism to promote inequality. In other words, fundamental school inequality didn’t pose a constitutional problem, only the explicit denial of a seat next to a white kid did. Thus, the ways the story of the movement had been shrunk and distorted helped shape a much narrower idea of what the problem was, and emboldened this court backsliding.

Given this history, then, it should not be surprising that a 2014 University of California, Los Angeles, study found that New York had the most segregated schools in the country (with charter schools in New York City some of the most segregated)—and that many Northern metropolises were more segregated than Southern ones.⁹⁵ After a decades-long struggle involving school inequities and state funding, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity brought suit in 1993, challenging the inequitable funding of New York’s schools using the state’s constitutional guarantee of a sound and basic education for all students. In 2001, Judge Leland de Grasse found deep racial inequities in terms of funding, but New York State appealed the case. When a court of appeals sided with de Grasse in 2003, the state refused to comply. De Grasse determined that \$5.6 billion in operating aid and \$9.2 billion in capital funding were needed, but the state committed only \$2.3 billion in 2007–2009, then froze the funding with the recession. New York City students are still owed billions of dollars.

Grappling with a fuller history of the Northern movement that steadfastly challenged educational inequality and school segregation raises important and unsettling questions. The problem did not rest with the poor values of Black parents or poor behaviors of Black students (as many Northern officials tried to claim) but with a deeply inequitable school system that provided educational resources, small class size, up-to-date facilities, and jobs disproportionately to white people. Like their Southern counterparts, many Black parents in the North built movements, trying tactic after tactic, to call attention to the problem and demand desegregation and equality for their children. Seeing these efforts, and the racial inequality left to fester in many places, raises questions about the narrow

ways the civil rights movement is understood. Many commentators now talk about how schools are “resegregating,” highlighting the ways that civil rights era progress in desegregating schools in the South has been significantly eroded.⁹⁶ But this ignores—and erases—the fact that many school systems, including New York’s, never desegregated. According to a 2013 report, nine of the top ten most segregated US cities are in the North, with Detroit being the most segregated city and New York, Boston, and Los Angeles (despite their reputations for cosmopolitanism) at numbers three, nine, and ten, respectively.⁹⁷

Systemic school inequality extended above the Mason–Dixon Line, and activists fought for decades to challenge it, but city elites, white citizens, and much of the mainstream media—with tacit and sometimes explicit support from the federal government—protected systemic inequality in Northern cities. By ignoring this history, the fable makes it seem as though injustice is vanquished in the end, and that society, in time, appreciates those who fight injustice through proper channels. Despite a massive show of organized, persistent, and peaceful direct action in New York and Boston (two cities that pride themselves on their openness and liberalism), white officials and citizens resisted change. They continued to cast Black and Latino youth as the problem, amplifying criminalization and programs for “juvenile delinquency,” while persistently ignoring or demonizing Black and Latino demands for equitable resources, open hiring, and desegregation. The kinds of movements built by parents such as Mae Mallory, Ruth Batson, and Ellen Jackson, and by community leaders including Ella Baker and Milton Galamison, and by 460,000 student boycotters, help us see their relentless dreams for excellent schools for all in the city.

The fuller history of Northern struggle reveals the ways the fable has helped maintain the idea that the problem rests in the behaviors and values present in urban communities of color today, as opposed to the lack of will to change in society more broadly. Seeing these long-standing Black movements in these cities, and the institutions and citizens that resisted them, forces us to reexamine the ways we talk about the uprisings of the 1960s and where our cities are today.