

2007

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### Recommended Citation

Judge, Douglas (2007) "Housing, Race and Schooling in Seattle: Context for the Supreme Court Decision," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol2/iss1/9>

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## ARTICLE

### **Housing, Race and Schooling in Seattle: Context for the Supreme Court Decision**

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Seattle schools were not segregated by law, and no public official encouraged *de facto* segregation as occurred in Chicago and other major Northern cities. The ‘enemy’ in Seattle was indifference in the white population born of its perception that "there was no problem" in the city. Thus civil rights leaders who complained about "ghetto schools" were often viewed as publicity-seekers intent on blaming the entire community for the educational deficiencies of black children. (Taylor, 1995, p. 8)

As the United States Supreme Court currently considers the use of race in high school admittance policies in Seattle, WA (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*) and Louisville, KY (*Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*), the issues of racial segregation and unequal school achievement have received renewed national attention. In an effort to understand the context surrounding this important decision, new eyes have turned to Seattle and Louisville to assess the state of school desegregation efforts more than fifty years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. In Seattle, much of the controversy surrounding this case centers on who gets into Ballard High School, located in the predominantly white north end, and considered by many to be the marquee school in the district. Though Seattleites often pride themselves on their liberal values, and may tout the fact that Seattle was the largest city in the nation to implement a mandatory district-wide desegregation plan relying on busing *without a court order*, an analysis of historical and contemporary housing and schooling policies paints a more complicated picture of some of the racial dynamics at play in the city. In order to provide context for the issues at stake at Ballard High School and in the case before the Supreme Court, it is the intent of this article to present some of these complexities. After an overview of racial and housing demographic trends in Seattle, I present a revealing pattern of events surrounding district desegregation efforts since the *Brown* ruling. I then discuss implications of these patterns for today’s Seattle public school students. I have also included a timeline of key events in [Appendix 1](#).

### **Race and Housing in Seattle: Demographic Trends**

The city of Seattle is home to over half a million people, approximately 70% of whom are white, 13% are Asian or Pacific Islander, 9% are African American, 5% are Hispanic, and 1% are Native American. Statewide, whites make up 82% of the population, making Seattle the state’s most diverse large city (City of Seattle, 2005, US Census Bureau, 2000). The city is bisected roughly from east to west by the Ship Canal, a narrow waterway which provides boat passage from Lake Washington to the east, through Lake Union, and eventually on to the Puget Sound to the west. Some have referred to this waterway as Seattle’s “Mason-Dixon” line, as it has historically served as a border between Seattle’s ethnically diverse central district and south end, and the mostly white neighborhoods to the north.

An aggressive state-wide growth management plan, which has concentrated new residential and commercial development in existing areas over the last 16 years (commonly described as “in-fill”), and a relatively recent economic boom fueled largely by the high-tech sector have combined to dramatically drive up housing costs in the city, where the median home price reached nearly \$450,000 (Seattle Post Intelligencer, January 24, 2007). As a result, in a situation familiar to many cities across the country, Seattle neighborhoods, which have historically housed people of color, are quickly

gentrifying. Though this shift has generally forced people of color to move to more affordable suburbs south of the city, Seattle remains highly segregated, especially for African Americans (Davis, 2005). This residential segregation has a long, sometimes violent, and often unmentioned history in Seattle, a city which prides itself on its progressive leanings. A review of this history helps us to understand the subsequent struggle which ensued over attempts at school integration.

Separate from the ethnic enclaves that can serve immigrants as temporary “ports of entry” into a new community, residential segregation, “can also result from the ‘collective actions’ of whites against minorities” (Davis, 2005). Such actions served to racially isolate people of color in Seattle (at least officially) until the passage of the Fair Housing Ordinance in 1963, which made housing discrimination a crime. Up until that point (and beyond), residential segregation resulted from both private acts and public policy. Privately, actions included exclusionary policies at hospitals, racially restrictive housing covenants, cross burnings, intimidation, and other violence.<sup>[1]</sup> Public policy issues included discriminatory mortgage insurance practices, the locating of public housing in neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income people of color, and the police harassment of African Americans “after sundown” in white neighborhoods north of the Ship Canal bridge (Loewen, 2006, Davis, 2005, & Taylor, 1995).

Though such segregationist practices have been well documented, the fact that Seattle lacks the type of, “physical deterioration so common in the racially exclusive slums of eastern cities... most whites and some blacks argue[d] that, ‘there was no racial problem’ in the city, while ignoring less obvious signs of decay and discontent” (Taylor, 1995, p. 3). This argument that there is “no race problem” in Seattle, despite ongoing racial segregation, has been (and continues to be) at the heart of much conflict over Seattle’s consideration of race in its attempts to address differential educational achievement. An analysis of events surrounding each significant attempt made by Seattle Public Schools to racially integrate reveals a pattern which complicates the claim that Seattle integrated *without a court order*.

### **A Pattern of Conflict: Seattle’s Efforts towards School Desegregation**

Following the 1954 *Brown* decision, Seattle began collecting data on the racial makeup of its schools, which mirrored the segregation seen citywide in housing patterns. In 1957 in its first census of enrollment by race, the Seattle School Board found that 5% of its 91,782 students were black, 81% of whom were concentrated in nine of the city’s 112 schools. In 1962, Seattle’s Garfield High School, located in the central district, became the first predominantly black high school in the state, with more than 51% black students. Six of the ten other high schools in the city had no more than five black students each (Taylor, 1995). In this same year, the Seattle chapter of the NAACP sued the Seattle School District to end public school segregation. In an out-of-court settlement, the district agreed to implement a limited school transfer plan to ease racial imbalances. This voluntary program, wherein the district did not provide transportation (students rode public buses or carpooled) had very little impact, and led to an intensification of community efforts towards desegregation. From this point forward, a pattern emerges that makes the lack of consensus around addressing racial integration in Seattle quite clear. Significant policy decisions made by the school district to desegregate often came only as a result of strong mobilization and the threat of legal action from the pro-integration civil rights community. Additionally, such policies were nearly always followed by rapid legal challenges and statewide voter initiatives opposing the use of mandatory busing as a means of integration. Below we present several examples illustrating this pattern.

Following the failure of the district’s initial voluntary busing program to significantly impact the racial imbalance in city schools, Seattle’s civil rights leaders intensified their pressure on the district, including a two-day boycott of Seattle Public Schools in 1966 and a visit by Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman Stokley Carmichael in 1967. The district responded in 1968 by introducing the book *The Role of Racial Minorities in the United States* to all teachers to use in their classrooms in an attempt to address general ignorance about the contributions to American society by people of color. Two years later the district adopted a mandatory school desegregation plan involving four of the city's middle schools. However, this plan was not implemented for two years, as it was challenged in a lawsuit by the group Citizens against Mandatory Busing. The district's policy was upheld by the Washington State Supreme Court in 1972.

Again, in 1977, the district was pressured to take more aggressive action to desegregate its schools in a lawsuit filed by the NAACP, the ACLU, and the Church Council of Greater Seattle. In response, the district implemented the "Seattle Plan," a mandatory district-wide busing program, and became the largest city in the country to do so without a court order. Only two months after this plan went into effect, 61% of Seattle voters, and 66% statewide approved an anti-busing initiative sponsored by the Citizens for Voluntary Integration Committee. The district's policy was upheld in 1982, when the U.S. Supreme Court found the state initiative unconstitutional.

Another policy change took place in 1988, under pressure from community members who felt that busing disproportionately burdened students of color. The district introduced a "controlled choice" plan, where parents could choose from a cluster of neighborhood schools, but priority was still given to those whose movement would improve racial balance. Once again, a state initiative was passed the following year which would guarantee schools an increased amount of funding from city revenues in exchange for an end to mandatory busing. The school board rejected this deal and left the busing plan intact. That same year the city elected its first African-American mayor Norm Rice, a strong busing proponent, over Doug Jewett, the founder of Save Our Schools, an organization whose mission was to end mandatory busing.

Throughout the 1990s the school district modified its busing plan by expanding the "controlled choice" program to include any school in the district in 1992, and voting to end mandatory busing in elementary schools by 1997. The following year brought about a familiar pattern of events: on the same day that the district implemented an "open enrollment" policy ending race-based busing for middle and high school students, yet retaining the use of race as a determinant in making admittance decisions for popular schools (called a "racial tiebreaker"), voters approved state initiative I-200 that outlawed the consideration of race in public employment, education, and contracting decisions. Based largely upon this initiative, in 2000 a group of white parents from north Seattle whose children were denied admittance to Ballard High School filed the lawsuit now being considered by the U.S. Supreme Court.

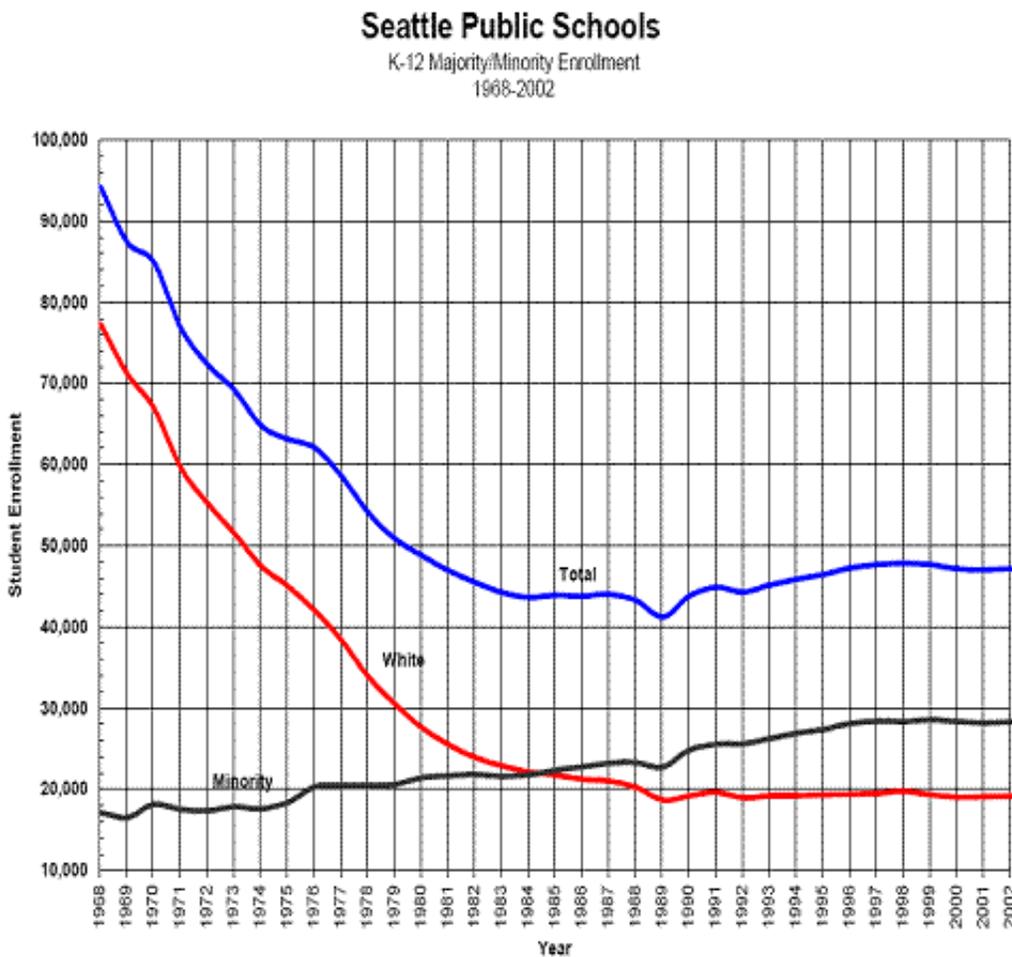
As the case has worked its way through the appeals courts over the last six years, the issue has remained a contentious one, as highlighted by the public resignation of Ballard High School's principal David Engle in protest over the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals (2002) decision that the district's consideration of race indeed violated I-200. This decision was overturned by a larger eleven-judge panel of the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit in 2005, setting the course for the current appeal being heard by the Supreme Court. The pattern of conflict over school integration which has played out over the last fifty years complicates the popular opinion that Seattle was somehow immune from the racial strife evident in other American cities. Although the district's use of the "racial tiebreaker" has been suspended since the 2002 ruling, an analysis of community reactions to these events reveals that race still "matters" in contemporary Seattle (West, 1993).

## **Race and Schooling: Contemporary Implications**

Given Seattle’s ongoing residential segregation and the pattern of conflict over how to address such educational ramifications, a look at how Seattleites have dealt with these realities provides additional context for making sense of the issues at stake in the current case before the Supreme Court. First, as indicated in Figure 1 below, in what some describe as “white flight” from Seattle Public Schools, the percentage of white students enrolled has steadily declined since the late 1960’s, while the percentage of students of color has increased. In the year 2000, 70.1% of the residents of Seattle were white, yet accounted for only 40% of the students in Seattle Public Schools (US Census Bureau, Census 2000).

While some of this may be due to a demographic shift in the type of white families moving into Seattle (those not having children), an important factor to consider is that Seattle has one of the highest rates of private school enrollment in the country, which has been between 25-30% for the last two decades, corresponding closely with the implementation of district-wide mandatory busing in 1978 (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, October 25, 2005).

**Figure 1.**



Prepared by Enrollment Planning November 13th 2002

(source: <http://www.seattleschools.org/area/facilities-plan/demo/demo.xml>)

Of those who choose to stay enrolled in the city’s public schools, it appears that the Ship Canal still serves as a racial dividing line in the city. An analysis of the racial/ethnic makeup of Seattle’s high

schools reveals that in October 2005, whites made up 55.6% of the student population north of the ship canal, and only 30.8% of those to the south, though some individual schools remain highly segregated (such as Rainier Beach and Cleveland, the city's southernmost high schools, which serve nearly 94% and 92% students of color, respectively).<sup>[2]</sup>

Finally, a return to Ballard High School reveals an additional insight into the context surrounding this case. Here we compare Ballard, which enrolls more than 62% white students, to Franklin High School, a school of comparable size in Seattle's south end which enrolls nearly 90% students of color, both of which are highlighted in articles in this section of the journal. During the last ten years, the Franklin Alumni Association has distributed more than \$170,000 to support extracurricular activities for students (Franklin Alumni Association, 2006). During the 2005-2006 school year alone, the Ballard Athletic Booster club distributed \$171,000 to support athletic programs and build school spirit (Ballard High School Athletic Booster Club, 2006). During the previous year, the Ballard High School Foundation raised more than \$250,000 in six months for the construction of a new greenhouse on campus (Ballard High School Foundation, 2005). Though there is certainly more to the quality of the educational experience of students than money, this type of discrepancy may help the reader make sense of the issues at stake in the current decision before the Supreme Court.

<sup>[1]</sup> The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project has collected extensive documentation of such practices in photographs, maps, video interviews, and other such historical information. All of these are available through an excellent multimedia website: <http://www.civilrights.washington.edu>.

<sup>[2]</sup> Calculations performed by this author, based on data prepared by the Enrollment Planning Department, Seattle Public Schools, July 31, 2006 (Revised August 2, 2006), available at: [http://www.seattleschools.org/area/m\\_families/High\\_School\\_by\\_Eth.pdf](http://www.seattleschools.org/area/m_families/High_School_by_Eth.pdf)

## Appendix 1.

### Desegregation Efforts in Seattle Public Schools:

#### A Timeline<sup>[1]</sup>

- **May 17, 1954:** Landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision strikes down *Plessy v. Ferguson* doctrine of "separate but equal," by unanimously declaring that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," and mandates desegregation of all U.S. public schools.
- **1957:** In its first census of enrollment by race, the Seattle School Board finds that 5% of its 91,782 students were black, 81% of whom were concentrated in nine of the city's 112 schools (Taylor, 1995).
- **1962:** Seattle's Garfield High School, located in the central district, becomes the first predominantly black high school in the state, with 51.4% black students. Six of the ten other high schools in the city had no more than five black students (Taylor, 1995).
- **1962:** The Seattle chapter of the NAACP brings suit against the Seattle School District to end public school segregation.
- **August 28, 1963:** This suit is settled out of court when the Seattle School Board adopts a program allowing students to voluntarily transfer from one school to another to ease racial imbalances. Initially, transportation was not provided by the district, and students rode public buses or

carpooled. This effort resulted in little movement of students between highly diverse south Seattle and mostly white north Seattle schools.

- **August 30, 1963:** The Seattle City Council enacts Seattle's first open housing ordinance, making any discrimination in housing a misdemeanor punishable by fine. Following passage of this ordinance, violence breaks out in white suburbs in protest, including cross burnings, throwing of incendiary devices, and guns being fired into black homes (Taylor, 1995).
- **March 31 - April 1, 1966:** Seattle civil rights leaders organize a two-day boycott of Seattle Public Schools to protest a lack of significant desegregation efforts on behalf of the school board. The boycott draws between 3,000-4,000 students per day, 30% of whom were white (Clarke, 2005, Taylor, 1995).
- **April, 1967:** Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman Stokely Carmichael speaks to 4,000 at Seattle's Garfield High School in opposition to the closure of predominantly black schools. His visit highlights the split in the black community between integrationists and those opposed to busing because such efforts disproportionately burdened black children (Taylor, 1995).
- **September 23, 1968:** The Seattle School District introduces *The Role of Racial Minorities in the United States*. The book aims to correct general ignorance about how people of color participated in and contributed to American Society, and was prepared specifically for the district's desegregation program.
- **November 11, 1970:** The Seattle School Board adopts a Middle School Desegregation Plan calling for mandatory busing to achieve racial balance in four of the city's middle schools. This was the first mandatory plan adopted by the board. The plan was delayed for two years because of a lawsuit by the group Citizens Against Mandatory Busing.
- **September 6, 1972:** Following a ruling by the Washington State Supreme Court which unanimously approved of the district's middle school plan, the Seattle School District implements the Middle School Desegregation Plan.
- **1977:** The Seattle chapter of the NAACP, the ACLU, and Church Council of Greater Seattle threaten federal legal action to force Seattle School District to take more aggressive action to desegregate schools.
- **September 29, 1978:** Seattle School District implements the "Seattle Plan," a district-wide busing plan, which involved about 12,500 of the district's 54,000 students. By doing so, Seattle became the largest city in America to implement a district-wide desegregation plan relying on busing without a court order.
- **November, 1978:** Two months after the "Seattle Plan" goes into effect, 61% of Seattle voters, and 66% statewide approve I-350, a statewide anti-busing initiative sponsored by the Citizens for Voluntary Integration Committee.
- **June 30, 1982:** The U.S. Supreme Court narrowly (5-4) rules that I-350, the 1978 voter-approved measure banning mandatory busing for desegregation, is unconstitutional.
- **1988:** Seattle school board introduces "controlled choice" plan in place of mandatory busing,

which allows parents to choose their child's school from a geographic cluster of approximately seven neighborhood schools. Parents could rank their choices, but priority would be given to students whose race would create a racial balance in the school. This new plan was implemented largely due to criticism that the "Seattle Plan" bused too many students, a disproportionate amount of whom were students of color, and left many schools either over- or under-enrolled.

- **1989:** Anti-busing state initiative I-34 narrowly passes, which would guarantee that Seattle schools receive 6% of all city revenue in exchange for an end to the use of mandatory busing for desegregation in the Seattle School District. The Seattle school board turns down the deal and leaves busing intact.
- **1989:** Seattle elects its first African-American mayor Norm Rice, a strong proponent of busing. Rice defeated Doug Jewitt, the founder of Save Our Schools, an organization whose mission was to end mandatory busing.
- **1992:** Seattle school board approves a controlled assignment plan, allowing students to choose their own school, even if attendance required a bus ride.
- **November 20, 1996:** The Seattle School Board votes unanimously to end mandatory busing for the purpose of racial desegregation in elementary schools, beginning with the 1997-1998 school year.
- **November 4, 1998:** Washington voters pass I-200, a state initiative which outlawed the use of race in public employment, education, and contracting decisions.
- **November 4, 1998:** The school board dismantles the last remnants of the "Seattle Plan," ending race-based busing of students in middle and high schools. They implement an "open-enrollment" policy, wherein ninth graders may select any high school in the district, and as many pupils are given their "first choice" assignments as possible. If more students select a particular school as their first choice than its capacity, a series of "tiebreakers" are applied to regulate admissions. These tiebreakers considerations are prioritized as follows:
  - 1) All applicants who have a sibling already attending the school are admitted.
  - 2) If the school in question is more than fifteen percentage points above or below the racial makeup of Seattle's high school population, applicants (all of whom indicated that the school was their "first choice") are admitted on the basis of race until the enrollment is brought within the +/- 15% range. This comes to be called the "racial tiebreaker."
  - 3) Applicants whose residences are closest to the school.
- **July, 2000:** The group Parents Involved in Community Schools files a lawsuit against Seattle Public School's use of race-based school assignments, saying it violates the U.S. Constitution, the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the 1998 voter-approved state Initiative-200.
- **April, 2002:** 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals rules that Seattle School's use of the racial tiebreaker violates Initiative-200. David Engle, then principal at Seattle's north-end Ballard High School and strong supporter of integration, resigns in protest of the decision, receiving a standing ovation from faculty and students.
- **October, 2005:** A special 11-member panel of the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals rejects this

earlier ruling by a 7-4 vote and upholds the Seattle school district's limited consideration of race as a factor in determining high school assignments in order to avoid the educational disadvantages of racially isolated schools and to secure the educational benefits of student body diversity. The district's use of the "racial tiebreaker" remains suspended.

- **June, 2006:** The 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit decision is appealed to and accepted by The U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court will hear arguments on the case in fall, 2006.
- **December 4, 2006:** The court hears arguments on cases in Seattle and Louisville, Kentucky on what steps school boards may use to ensure racially mixed schools. A decision is anticipated in the spring of 2007.

[1] Information for this timeline is a synthesis of information from numerous sources. For details, see References.

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