



## The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project

*For Truth, Learning and Change*

A project of Union of Minority Neighborhoods

### Report on Phase One



## CAN WE TALK

About Equity, Access, and Excellence?

*Connecting Our History to Our Future*

September 2012





## LISTENING TO VOICES FROM PHASE ONE: ABOUT TRUTH-SEEKING, LEARNING AND CHANGE

**Below and throughout the report in italics are some of the voices we heard during film screenings/ presentations, “community convenings”, capacity-building events, and one-on-one conversations (as well as artists and thinkers who have helped us better understand what we heard):**

*Social truth is always contested and negotiated: it is based on multiple narratives and reflects power structures.*

*We have to understand that this project is destabilizing the social order, contradicting “truth” as it is accepted.*

*The process of creating the narrative is more important than the narrative itself.*

*The part that shames us and the part that makes us proud is our story. If we’re striving for justice and wholeness, we must have the whole truth, the whole story. History can teach us if we listen to history. In the U.S., we have a sense of history as being what makes us proud. If it doesn’t make us proud, we don’t want to hear it. To skip this is a disservice to history and a disservice to ourselves*

*Use a holistic approach: find truth, seek justice, and empower constituencies to foster change.*

*You must take everyone seriously and assume good faith on the part of everyone as you construct a dialogue for change.*

*People don’t want to go back. It’s hard for them to believe that if you delve into the hard stuff they will gain rather than lose.*

*I am wondering how emotion will be allowed within dialogue and not just seen as “interfering” with it.*

*Why does Boston not encourage or have honest conversations about its racial/class/educational divides? In what ways has the effect of busing contributed (or not) to the racial and class divisions that are so pervasive here?*

*How do we create more opportunities to have better conversations about race and class? How can we encourage folks to speak openly about their experiences? How can we help each other open up? How can we support this growth and change?*

*Power is not just something we have: it’s something we do.*

*Back then achieving quality education for all was about having access to resources, and today it is still about resources; not just in the city but in the suburbs as well. We have different levels of resources within districts as well as between districts. How are we going to measure inequality today within our school district? There is silent resistance to giving everyone the education they need and deserve.*

*What I tried to do as a parent and community member then has paid off, because I see another generation trying to learn from our pain, our sorrows, our strategies, and our happy times.*

*Conquer and divide can be so cruel. I'm proud of being a Bostonian and I want to work to bridge this bad part of our city's history so that our future is better and brighter. This might start as a dark story, however, the light at the end of the tunnel should lead us all together in the right direction.*

*As we think about how we assign kids to schools today, we have to ask ourselves, what are things we can do so that we don't reproduce inequality?*

*Today the Boston Public Schools offers good education to some children, but needs to offer it to all. It's especially struggling in three areas: with English language learners, special education students, and black and brown boys.*

*As a community, city, and school district, we need to ask: what does high quality education for all look like, what examples and whose experience can we learn from, and what do our schools need to do to get there so that all, not just some, kids are prepared to succeed, live meaningful lives, and contribute to the world? We are currently doing an excellent job at maintaining stratification. To produce educated and compassionate adults, we need to radically restructure.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	1
II. Executive Summary	4
III. What We Did and How We Did It	6
IV. What We've Heard	11
V. Connecting the Past to Today and the Future	20
VI. Doing the Work	25
VII. Moving Forward	29
Appendix	31



## I. INTRODUCTION

*The nation's memory of Brown should be a constant call to redeem the unfulfilled promises of desegregation and educational equality. Yet, the historical record suggests redemption is not possible unless we are willing to face our past squarely, commit the resources necessary to changing the deplorable inequalities of the present, and embrace an underlying commitment to substantive equality.* ---James Anderson, *A Tale of Two Browns: Constitutional Equality and Unequal Education*

2014 will mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that ended the legal segregation of public schools in the United States and propelled the process of desegregation throughout the nation. That same year will be the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the court-ordered desegregation of Boston's public schools and the civic crisis that accompanied it. The many ways this country has improved since then in terms of race and racism cannot be overrated. On the other hand, the extent to which racism has remained the same or worsened cannot be overstated.

As issues of race and racism have shifted during this period, so have the disparities between classes. *Brown* happened in the midst of unprecedented levels of shared economic prosperity in this country. Yet less than two years before this anniversary, we have greater economic disparities than any time since the Great Depression.

Along with the movement toward racial desegregation, this same period brought movement towards greater economic fairness and struggles to build real social and economic safety nets for people. As we write this report our nation hurtles towards dismantling landmark policies of social innovation, access and equity catalyzed by the *Brown* decision, and the New Deal.

### TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF EQUITY

Equality is every one getting the same. Equity is everyone getting what they need. (C. Alvarado)

*Racial equity: A process that acknowledges the existence of systemic racism and through deliberate strategies, policies and practices seeks actively to identify, challenge and reduce systemic racism in all its various forms wherever they exist.* (City of Hamilton, Ontario)

Equity: when race and class are no longer predictors of education and other life outcomes. (From 2012 Conference of Kirwan Institute on Transforming Race)

Educational equity is a federally mandated right of all students to have equal access to classes, facilities, and educational programs no matter what their national origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, first language, or other distinguishing characteristic. In upholding educational equity, school districts are required to provide certain programs for students to ensure equal education. For example, students with disabilities have access to specialized education programs.

*Equity means all people have full and equal access to opportunities that enable them to attain their full potential.* (Metropolitan Area Planning Commission)

The Union of Minority of Neighborhoods (UMN), a community organizing organization in Boston, MA, first looked at the effects of the desegregation crisis by listening to the voices of some of those most marginalized: Black parents of Boston's "urban" children and largely impoverished people of all races seeking criminal offender record information (CORI) reform and relief from the mass incarceration system so tied to failures in education. As we talked to more and more diverse groups of people throughout the city, we have come to believe that all in the city who are committed to race and class equity and access for all—in education and beyond—can be served by going back together and looking at what happened then, how it effects what's happening now, and what truths we must face to have a better outcome – a public education system and city in alignment with our values.

Listening to the first voices that called us to the project brought us to taking on this project. As we've listened to other voices, we've been told again and again that as we look to the past the project must be relevant to present challenges facing public education and the city. Three themes have emerged as we have explored the triumph and trauma of this era: the struggle for **Equity**, for **Access**, and for **Excellence** across divides of race and class.

We set out to meet and have achieved the following phase one goals:

- Invite people and organizational partners into the project.
- Build a Learning Network to support this process.
- Begin to understand the context for this crisis from various perspectives in order to get a better idea of the stories we need to seek out to be inclusive.
- Use what we learn in the process to clarify goals for making this project something that serves the city—especially those marginalized by race, class, and lack of access to equitable resources and power.

This report does not pretend to be a full expression of the impact of the Boston busing/ desegregation crisis. Like the film *Can We Talk? Learning from Boston's Busing/Desegregation Crisis* that kicked off the project, this phase has been the next step in finding and bringing forth all voices that want and need to be heard on this crisis and its impact. It is our intention to honor and call forth those who see this history as living and critical to understanding and illuminating where we are today and the choices before us—choices about race and class equity, about excellence in public education, and about authentic diversity and inclusion.

This is not an academic research report. It is an organizing resource for and an invitation to more and more of the people, institutions, and communities of Boston committed to equity, access and excellence in our schools and our city. Learning together permeates all parts of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project. Learning together is a process of engagement. It involves discovering who we are, where there are places of mutual interest, and identifying our shared desire and action for change. The process must include exploring what each individual, organization, community and the city/culture as a whole can bring and is bringing to the learning and the search for new strategies for change.

The report was written by the staff: Donna Bivens, Meghan Doran and Jacqui Lindsay with tremendous analyzing, editing , synthesizing and facilitating done by BBDP committee members and volunteers listed in the appendix.



As to the structure of the report, after this introduction there is an executive summary that highlights major learning from the year and from the report. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methods we used. It also shares the frameworks that guided the project either from the beginning or as we began to encounter complexities in the work. Chapter 4 focuses on the voices we heard over that last year. This chapter highlights things we heard most often as well as the most meaningful critiques of the project both of which informed our plan for the next phase of our work. This chapter also includes learning from reading and capacity building events. Chapter 5 is our analysis of what we heard from the perspective of making connections between the crisis era and current challenges we face. Chapter 6 offers our reflections on what we've learned and the process of creating a learning environment not just as staff but for and from the larger Learning Network supporting BBDP. We look forward to and fully welcome discussion of the report and ideas for how to strengthen the work going forward.

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. ---Thomas Berry**

This report chronicles the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project's (BBDP) first phase of exploring the impact of 1970's Boston busing/desegregation crisis on public education and on the city of Boston. When Union of Minority Neighborhoods embarked on this journey over two years ago, the intention was to better understand the distress we kept hearing and seeing about "busing" –often referred to as the "elephant in the room." Those comments kept coming up in two groups: those we met in Massachusetts' organizing effort for Criminal Offender Records (CORI) reform and those we met in our organizing of and with Black parents around public school education challenges. We hoped that by acknowledging the obvious pain and better understanding its connection to today, energy would be freed up in those two often marginalized groups. Energy to confront the brokenness they experienced in and from those two increasingly interconnected systems for poor people and people of color: mass incarceration and public education.

The more we learned and the more people we talked and listened to, the clearer it became that this era was not just unfinished business for those vulnerable groups but for many others in Boston and beyond. It also came clear that their trauma or distress could not be addressed in a vacuum—it was and is part of the larger malaise our city and our country continues to suffer as a result of the intense race and economic disparity that continues to grow. Also, our ignorance about that era and the history that led up to it is a huge weakness for those of us wanting and working for equity, access and excellence for all. No one person can learn all there is to learn about this era but together we can tell a much bigger story about what how we got where we are and what we need to reclaim or let go of to get to the next *real* social change for those committed to equity access and excellence for public schools and for the city.

Now we are finishing up our first phase of the Project. This year of film screenings and presentations, community convenings, capacity building events all helped shape the findings of this report.

As we reflect on the report and our first phase major findings include:

- There is wide agreement that, given the challenges public education faces today, the Boston Busing/Desegregation project must make clear and strong links to current issues. Any attempts to look back to learn from Boston's history – the busing/desegregation crisis and its impact, as well as what led to it – must be for the purpose of better understanding and addressing today's challenges.
- The project must continue to define, understand, and address three key recurring issues to strengthen public education for all today:
  - Equity: The juncture of race and class inequity is at the core of challenges, in Boston's past and today, to quality public education for all

- Access: In many ways the desegregation process, then and now, could be characterized as a struggle over two things: who has access to what public education resources, influence, and decision-making power; and the difficulties that vulnerable people and communities have to maintain resources they have as well as secure access to resources that should be held in common to ensure the equal education of their and all children, which is protected by law.
- Excellence: What was a quality education in the 1970s, and which communities had access to it? What is a quality education today, which communities have access to it, which communities should have access to it, and whose knowledge, voice, and leadership are needed to answer these questions?

Based on what we learned from phase one of our work, the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project will focus on making links between equity, access, and excellence during the busing/desegregation crisis and today.

- We must widen our definition, awareness and understanding of the trauma and distress connected to the Boston busing/desegregation era – for individuals, communities, and the city – as well as gain deeper understanding of the benefits that have come from the era. We cannot fully address what has not been acknowledged or understood. We must seek out processes to do this across communities.
- The “master narrative” about this era minimizes and excludes the stories of many communities. We must collect more stories of individuals and the histories of communities in order to gain a systemic understanding of the era for the diversity of people, then and now, whose interests converge around wanting equity, access, and excellence for all.

We could not have predicted that in the midst of BBDP’s first year, a new city-wide school assignment process would be initiated that raised the very race and class equity issues at the heart of the Project. We continue to learn from and try to bring our learning to that too. Not surprisingly, those we met in our original organizing were largely missing from the meetings and presentations for that decision-making process. Our task in the next phase of the project is to hear more stories and learn more of this history together. We want to prioritize reconnecting with and privileging many of the voices that first inspired the Project as well as to make a special effort to seek out the stories we haven’t heard so far. In our work this year, we want to have a process that the stories of those who rarely get to speak for themselves and those whose voices are usually privileged get to inform each other in new ways.

More than one person has suggested to us that to keep saying the project is about learning can sound patronizing but nothing is farther from our intent. We cannot really come to a new story unless we are committed to learn from ourselves and each other. We can’t complete that task in the next year but a critical number of us can try and then hopefully leave pathways for others who find them useful. As we look at all the amazing resources, it’s clear that’s the way it was done for us.

### III. WHAT WE DID AND HOW WE DID IT

The first phase of the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project officially began on June 28, 2011 with the premiere of our film, *Can We Talk? – Learning from Boston’s Busing/Desegregation Crisis*. The film tells the stories of people the Union of Minority Neighborhoods (UMN) met while doing CORI reform and public education organizing. These are some of the people who convinced us that this period of Boston’s history and its impact – on people, communities, public education, and the city today – needed to be understood. We created the film to begin a public conversation to test this assumption.

#### GUIDING FRAMEWORKS

Over the year, we met with over 2000 people in neighborhoods, schools, activist organizations, workplaces, and government. We used three frameworks to guide our work:

- **THE TRANSITIONS MODEL:** Any complex change includes three phases – a clear ending, a neutral phase of learning and changing, the emergence of a new beginning
- **SEEING SYSTEMS:** This approach allows us to view the desegregation crisis on four dimensions: internal/individual, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural
- **TOUCHSTONES:** Based on the work of Parker Palmer, we model our practice on the premise that *There is always invitation, never invasion; always opportunity, never demand*. Twelve touchstones guide this work.

We spent the year using the film and other methods to achieve four key goals:

1. Introduce this project to the city.
2. Invite people to participate in it.
3. Begin to learn from people, organizations, and communities throughout Greater Boston what relationship they have to this crisis and its impact.
4. Discover whether they believe that revisiting and learning from this era is important to do to improve our schools and build a better Boston.

We created opportunities – through film screenings and discussions, capacity building events, meetings of BBDDP committees – to invite those we met to think together about what a project seeking to learn from this era might need to investigate, do, and accomplish to be a worthwhile undertaking.

Over the year, we met with over 2000 people in neighborhoods, schools, activist organizations, workplaces, and government. We used four primary methods of engagement:

- One-on-one conversations
- Film screenings/discussions of the film, *Can We Talk? Learning from Boston’s Busing/Desegregation Crisis*, and of the project
- Community convenings to begin to understand how different communities understood this era and their historical relationship to it
- Capacity building events to explore knowledge and skills needed to do this work.

We found that most people we encountered believe this era needs to be explored, learned from, and used to inform and propel change efforts today to improve public education for all and help create a city committed to opportunity for all. Moreover, a substantial number – over 500 – agreed to become a part of BBDP’s Learning Network: people who will be a support system, resource pool, and learning community for this work.

## FRAMEWORKS GUIDING THE PROJECT

It’s complicated to look back at a crisis that happened over 40 years ago. Experiences with public education and related issues of racism, economic inequities, and power inequities all contribute to this complexity and the emotions connected to these issues still swirling today. We introduced several tools for thinking about complex change to help people frame this complexity: the *Transitions Model*, systems thinking, and *Touchstones* to guide our work.

### *The Transitions Model: three phases*

“Why go back?” is a question any community preparing to revisit traumatic historical events must address. The William Bridges’ *Transitions Model*, introduced to us by our major funder, The Andrus Family Fund, is a tool that helped frame an answer. Simply put, Bridges found that people often believe that change means going directly from the old to the new. However, he says that any complex change includes a phase between the old and the new, i.e., a transition process. The Transitions Model posits that a more accurate understanding of transition involves three phases:

- Making a clear ending
- A neutral phase of learning and changing that is neither the old nor the new
- The emergence of a new beginning and new identity through trial and error

This tool is helping those involved with our project frame their understanding of the Boston busing/desegregation crisis: to see it not just as an event that took place in Boston almost 40 years ago, but to see it in a wider historical context. That crisis was an important flashpoint that was part of a much longer and larger struggle to achieve quality public education that came with the founding of public education and continues today.

The “ending” that instigated the crisis was The *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which ended legal segregation of public schools in the U.S. Boston’s 1974 desegregation order was a key strategy to help achieve the larger goal of greater equity, access, and quality public education for all. One of the tactics it offered to achieve desegregation was busing students between neighborhoods.

For many poor people and people of color, however, there has not been an end to racial or economic segregation or to disparities in equity, access and excellence in public education. For others, unacknowledged trauma or distress connected to the busing/desegregation crisis alienates them from entering that neutral phase of plotting out a “new beginning.” In Transitions terms, BBDP “goes back” to reclaim and lift up the stories of those who didn’t get an ending and to bring more of us into the “neutral zone” to claim together our commitment to quality public education and equity for all when such a commitment is not a given.

## Seeing Systems

Another tool that is critical for framing this project is systemic thinking. As we heard people discuss the desegregation crisis and current challenges in public education, we found that they were often distressed about different aspects of the crisis and would focus on different reform measures in their understanding of the current challenges. We began using a popular model of systemic oppression to frame our understanding of the desegregation crisis. This approach uses four dimensions of experience that together made up the desegregation crisis:

- **Internal/Individual:** the impact on or of individuals: for example, the trauma of individuals, or alienation from and distrust of the public education system
- **Interpersonal:** the impact on or of interpersonal relationships within and between communities: for example, a sense of community loss that came from the change, or distress that more privileged communities and those in privileged relationships did not share in the disruption to their communities and relationships and continue to have disproportionate power to influence change today
- **Institutional:** the impact on or of institutions: for example, the distress that inequities of resources and decision-making continued to reproduce
- **Cultural:** the impact on and of the culture or worldview: for example, there were complex inequities of race and class in who got to name the problem (Was it “neighborhood schools” or “quality education” or “desegregation” or “busing”?) and set the standards (Was it corporations or educators, parents, children, teachers or courts?)

Using this framework helped us better understand the distress we were hearing about this era and the project – from child victims of violence to activists to city officials. We believe that really exploring these four dimensions together can help us all to move to a larger, systemic analysis of this crisis and use what we learn to find creative systemic solutions to today’s challenges.

This four-dimensions tool helped frame the systemic content we needed to explore to understand the crisis and its impact today. To think systemically, however, also calls for a different process. The chart below compares the differences between conventional and systemic thinking:

Conventional Thinking	Systems Thinking
Concentrates on the parts themselves	Concentrates on the interaction of the parts and on overall organization
Does not recognize feedback	Recognizes the importance of feedback both positive and negative
Follows a linear direction, logical step by step	Open minded, unstructured with no set direction
Follows ideas related to causes and effects	Captures the variety of ideas
Looks for a dominant perspective or point of view – the “right” one.	Takes account of different opinions and points of view

Tells the system about itself	Reveals the system to itself
Implements whole scale change with few mechanisms	Tests change and reflects on its effect on the overall system

Those closest to the project have probably learned most about the benefit of this kind of thinking together. So many who have come in touch with the project have expressed appreciation and need for a process with these characteristics to look at the public school system and our country in general. Conventional processes that aim for immediate solutions to problems are, of course, just as important and necessary. But deeper systemic transitions, like the movement from a legally sanctioned inequitable and segregated public school system and society to high quality education system and society with equitable access, require the processes involved in systemic thinking to really get to core problems with equity and access at the root of our history.

Systems thinking also requires that we take into account diverse viewpoints and positions in order to transition to a school system and city that work for all.

### **Touchstones**

What has been important to navigate the differences that must be heard and understood to look back at this era is not just the content or the process but the spirit with which we work. The Union of Minority Neighborhoods, the organization that founded this project, has as its motto a quote by Frederick Douglas: *Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.* This describes the core of the organizing work UMN does day-by-day.

The Boston Busing/Desegregation project has brought us a complementary motto, from touchstones developed by Parker Palmer: *There is always invitation, never invasion; always opportunity, never demand.* We see these quotes from Frederick Douglas and Parker Palmer as a yin and yang in constant conversation, and sometimes tension, with each other. To come to shared purpose and understanding we need to listen to and learn more from ourselves and each other. That is the spirit of the spaces we seek to create for the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project.

- Come to the work with all of yourself
- Presume welcome and extend welcome
- Believe that it's possible to emerge refreshed, surprised, less burdened
- There is always invitation, never invasion; always opportunity, never demand
- No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight
- When the going gets rough, turn to wonder
- Speak your truth in ways that respect others' truths
- Speak for yourself
- Listen to the silence
- Observe confidentiality
- Turn to nature for insight and inspiration
- Let the beauty you love be what you do

Using these Touchstones helped us set a tone of welcome, engagement and learning. We trust they will guide and enrich our learning so we are better prepared for inevitable struggles when it is time to make demands of and challenge each other and those with conflicting values.

One of our core values in this work is learning and practicing transparency. We share these models as a way of sharing our thinking and framing of our work. We welcome feedback and dialogue on their usefulness, accuracy, and relevance. We also invite other models that might be added as we continue the project.



## IV. WHAT WE'VE HEARD

Through our film screenings, community convening process, and individual conversations, we've heard countless voices on the topic of Boston's busing/desegregation crisis this year. Three themes emerged around what we've heard across the city:

- The importance of understanding the community contexts in which the crisis occurred
- Surfacing of the missing or incomplete stories about the crisis
- Acknowledging the trauma and distress experienced in the city at multiple levels—then and today.

### **Community Context**

One of our goals for the past year was begin to learn about and support discussion about the historical context within which Boston's busing/desegregation crisis occurred. What we learned is that the community context within which the crisis occurred is often very important to people in how they understand this history. Not surprisingly, people draw on different contexts to understand this history based on their social location (community, race/ethnicity, class, occupation etc.). The challenge is holding together all these contexts to learn from them. Here are the key areas in which people have raised the context of the crisis throughout the year.

### **Context within and around Schools**

For many, understanding public school desegregation and busing requires a deep understanding of what was happening in the schools leading up to school desegregation, and the activism surrounding schools.

Boston's desegregation order grew out of the fight for equity and access for African Americans. The long national struggle to end legal segregation of public schools culminated with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. We learned, for example, that the *Morgan v. Hennigan* complaint provides evidence and arguments

## EMERGENT THEMES

**Community Contexts:** people talked about community-school relationships and also about broader trends and incidents in neighborhoods. All of this happened in a national context of politics and activism.

**Missing and Incomplete Stories:** *Common Ground* isn't the whole story. There are many across the city who feel their experiences are represented in the story of busing/school desegregation as its usually told.

**Trauma, Distress, and Violence:** People are still troubled by traumatic experiences from this era. Individuals experienced trauma, but we can also see trauma and distress for communities, institutions and the broader culture in the city. Trauma and distress from and about this era is not limited to those who were present and directly involved: it ripples out into all areas of the city whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

establishing the existence of widespread discrimination, segregation, and unequal opportunity in Boston Public Schools. It also makes clear that for the plaintiffs, the struggle for desegregation was far broader than “busing” – which can be seen as desegregation’s “school assignment” process. The federal court decision in this case laid out how pervasive and well-documented racial discrimination and segregation were in Boston Public Schools. The opinion provides a wealth of evidence in support of its findings. The document also reminds us that the court case was not narrowly confined to “busing” but was in fact about widespread, systemic, and intentional racial and class discrimination and segregation.

The conditions in the schools were well known to education activists in the city at the time. By the time the desegregation case was decided, parents, students and activists had been through many strategies to bring more quality education to the schools, including but not limited to, walk outs, Operation Exodus (in which black students were privately bused out of their neighborhoods), METCO (in which black students were bused to the suburbs), and community schools.

At the same time black activists and other education activists were struggling for equitable quality education and contemplating desegregation as one possible strategy, Asian and Latino/a parents, students and activists were struggling for quality education for students with limited English abilities.

Both of these groups were instrumental in getting a bilingual education law passed in 1971 that mandated bilingual classes for twenty or more students who spoke a different language. It was as part of the struggle for quality bilingual education that both the Quincy and Hernandez schools were formed.

#### **REMEMBERING SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AT THE RAFAEL HERNANDEZ SCHOOL**

*Every year the entire school at the Hernandez (which is a K-8 Spanish/English immersion program) puts on a play. At the end of the 2011 – 2012 school year, they decided to do a play about the history of their school. Their starting point? Boston’s busing/desegregation crisis. With the participation of long time educators and activists Virginia Dunn and Carmen Pola, the students wove a riveting story of the how the school came to be and flourish. An integral part of this story was the context in which the school developed, including struggles for and against school desegregation.*

Beyond race inequities, however, we heard frequently that many of the schools serving working class and poor *white* children were not providing a better education than schools serving of children of color.

#### **Neighborhood Context**

*I would say busing forced the community to open up and integrate, but there was a price, a huge price. (Participant in BBDP community convening in Chinatown)*

There is some debate about the extent to which pre-desegregation Boston schools could “be fairly characterized as neighborhood schools.” That aside, communities often had engaged relationships with and expectations of the schools in their neighborhoods. In Charlestown, neighborhood activists

negotiated for the building of new schools as part of urban renewal. At the time of school desegregation, many neighborhood residents felt they had made sacrifices in order to have a new neighborhood school which they would no longer have access to. In Chinatown, residents demanded input into the construction of a new Quincy school starting in 1969. The school was opened in 1976, but many of the residents never saw the benefit of the school they had fought for, due to desegregation school assignment changes. We also know that different schools had different sports and vocational focuses, so that people in the neighborhoods had come to have expectations about what trade their kids would study or sports they would play: their expectations became upended with school desegregation.

#### NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

*In Charlestown, neighborhood activists negotiated for the building of new schools as part of urban renewal. At the time of school desegregation, many neighborhood residents felt they had made sacrifices in order to have a new neighborhood school which they would no longer have access to.*

At the same time, neighborhood/community control over schools only extended so far. As the court order showed, Boston's school committee worked to keep schools segregated. As a result, students were assigned to schools that matched their racial classification but were farther away from their "neighborhoods." Schools were as much racially assigned as they were neighborhood based.

Nonetheless, neighborhood expectations about schools and community indicate deeper tensions and anxieties about integration and community cohesion that existed in neighborhoods – Black, White, Asian and Latino – across the city. People raised the issue of neighborhood segregation as an important context again and again. At the same time, residents of these segregated communities often reported feeling a tension between wanting to retain community cohesion/solidarity/support in their ethnically/racially distinct community and feeling integration was an important tool to combat the racism that pervaded and structured the city.

#### *Local/National Activism, Politics and Emergence of Women's Leadership*

Boston's busing/desegregation crisis came within a local and national context of protest, social movement building, and political turmoil. While much has been written about the urban politics of the time, we heard from people how this context impacted everyday life. Some talked about open racism in the city – in political speeches, on the radio, in the streets etc. Others talked about regular violence – including violent clashes at protests, police brutality, and the firebombing of the homes of people integrating neighborhoods. We also heard about the distribution of resources in the city and how people did and didn't get jobs based on their connections and financial resources. Finally we heard and read about the importance of women's leadership during this time period. For many women, the crisis was a period when they entered public life to speak out, protest and take leadership, which at times put them at odds with men in their communities.

#### *Missing and Incomplete Stories*

*I knew almost nothing about this before I saw the film, so it was very eye opening. I had no idea that something so violent happened in Boston. I always thought of that as something that only happened*

*in the South. It's a rather shocking reminder that maybe the Boston area isn't as progressive as we'd like to think. I think it's great that the project is spreading awareness about this part of our history. Young people need to know and understand why it happened so we can prevent something like this from happening again. It's important to know all of our history, even what we are not proud of.*  
(Codman Square)

Through showing “Can We Talk?” around the city, which does not give a full account of this history, we heard again and again the desire for more details and information about what happened during this time period. Even those who experienced the busing/desegregation crisis want to be able to see past their own piece of the story and hear the perspectives of others. We also heard that personal stories help people understand this history more deeply than hearing the ‘facts’ about what happened.

While we heard from people that they simply didn't know/ wanted to know the history, we also learned more about a ‘master narrative’ of the busing/desegregation crisis that many feel is incomplete. In other words, there is a story that is regularly told and accepted about the crisis which leaves out many parts of what happened. While people relate that ‘master narrative’ differently, much of the controversy centers around Anthony Lukas’ well-known book, *Common Ground*, and whether it adequately represents the history. Many have come to the conclusion that where *Common Ground* excels in storytelling and personalization, it paints a less than honest or complete picture of what led to Boston’s busing/desegregation crisis and why it happened.

Of course, *Common Ground* is not the only examination of this era; there have been countless representations and analyses of this time – books, articles, conferences, dissertations, plays, and documentaries – some of which challenge what many see as a flawed record left by *Common Ground*. Mel King, Robert Dentler, Jeanne Theoharis, James Green, the film, *Eyes on the Prize*, and others all take on Lukas’ narrative, challenging his assumptions and adding to our understanding. Much of this work focuses on the struggles of education activists in Boston working for equity and access in education leading up to the court-ordered school desegregation through busing. While Lukas’ account focuses mostly on white leaders and power brokers in the city, these other works emphasize the complex relationships between race, class and power in the city that fueled the crisis.

In spite of these other accounts of the era, we heard again and again over the past year from people who were involved in this activism that the struggle for educational equity and access is often excluded from the story of ‘busing’ in its popular retelling. In fact, some people challenged our framing of the project, suggesting our starting point should be earlier in struggles for equity and access in the city. Others continue to object to our use of the language of ‘busing,’ arguing that it diverts attention from the issues of segregation and educational equity, access, and excellence.

It is not only the struggle for educational equity, access, and excellence that has been excluded from the master narrative. There are many other stories we have heard that need to be told. Examples include:

- The story of what was happening in Boston’s Latino/a and Asian communities
- The story of those who went through school desegregation (especially young men during that era – we have heard more from women)

- The story of communities as viewed by the people who lived in those communities, including the story of South Boston from a South Boston perspective (many originally from this neighborhood feel it has been misrepresented)
- The story of those who were committed to making school desegregation work, before, during AND after the crisis
- The story of schools that didn't experience violence

These are just some of the stories that people want to tell and hear publicly. The point is not only that these stories are told, but that the people who experienced them get a chance to both tell them and be heard. We found innumerable perspectives on the Boston busing/desegregation crisis. There are also wide variations in people's knowledge of the era. Individuals, organizations, and communities have brought very different understandings of the era to BBDP's gatherings. No one person or body holds the full complexity of this history. It is clear that *all* have something to teach *and* something to learn.

### **Trauma, Distress and Violence**

*The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past. (William Faulkner)*

Many of those who convinced UMN that it was important to revisit this era had directly experienced violence as children on the buses, as resisters to having their communities desegregated, or as public education workers or activists. We do not yet know the extent of this trauma or distress and expect we will learn more about it as we seek out more stories from the people of Boston in the next phase of our work. We have, however, learned a lot about the scope of this trauma during the past year. As we listened to a wider variety of people talk about the era, there were many expressions of distress—if not trauma—connected to this era even from people who were not born yet or not living in Boston during that time. As we listened to these stories we found that we were hearing about trauma across levels of the systems framework – the trauma of this era impacted not only individuals, but also communities, institutions and even the whole culture and reputation of the city.

### **The Internal/Individual Perspective**

*The legacy still lives on though. So many parents of youth today were robbed and remain disenfranchised by BPS. Many are resistant to having anything to do with the school community, and I can't blame them. However, if we want to fix anything, we need their help and engagement. (BESJ)*

*Looking at this film I now realize that my mother was not crazy. (Dimock)*

We met people who were traumatized by the violence and have not been able to make peace with it. This showed up as they told stories they seem stuck in, or as they expressed repulsion to talking about their experience. But there are some who have been deeply damaged by the violence who haven't had anyone really ask about it or care to know how it impacted their lives and the lives of their children. One woman who approached us about the project said, "I still have a scar on the back of my head from one of the rocks." She showed no bitterness but, though she eagerly offered to find ways to support the project, she did not want to talk publicly herself about what she had been through. We've talked to people who left the city over such traumas and will never live in Boston again. One man who later

moved to Washington, DC, but as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader experienced months of riding on buses that were stoned or cursed in Boston, said incredulously, “I could never understand how people could get up such hatred day-after-day.” Many who experienced this level of trauma expressed deep gratitude for having a chance to tell their stories and have them honored and listened to. If not totally healing, it was a relief: it took a burden they carried inside and put it out into a larger container and context for understanding, response, and correction.

Naomi Tutu spoke to this level of trauma. Sharing lessons learned from South Africa’s truth and reconciliation process after apartheid, she said, “We need to open up and lance wounds that have been covered over even as they

continue to fester. We can then move from guilt and oppression to wholeness and community.” Hearing and seriously considering the stories of those who experienced this type of loss is key to tending their wounds as individuals.

### STILL A SEGREGATED CITY?

While Boston may have changed since the seventies, there is still evidence of significant racial segregation. An analysis of 2010 Census data show that Boston remains a highly segregated city.

Among major metropolitan areas in the U.S., Boston ranked:

- 11<sup>th</sup> in Black-White segregation
- 4<sup>th</sup> in Hispanic-White segregation, and
- 5<sup>th</sup> in Asian-White segregation

Source: <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report2.pdf>

### *The Interpersonal/Intercommunity Perspective*

*Busing played a major role in how neighborhoods in Boston interact with each other. Those interactions have spilled into our politics and public policies. Many young people may not be aware of this history and how this affected their community. (Youth Workers)*

*[This] seemed to exacerbate the feelings of otherness, of animosity between different groups, as communities felt invaded by outsiders and, therefore, forgot the ties that held them together: shared poverty, desire for quality education. (Primary Source)*

*No research, no community assessment, no forums, no town meetings: any time people are forced or mandated to do something always meets with resistance. Have students meet students and dialogue about fears, concerns, differences, and solutions – assign partnerships. (Dimock)*

On the interpersonal/intercommunity level, what we heard could probably best be described as distress or unease. The wounds were not as raw but it was clear that they were still festering. On this level, some mourned for what they experienced as the loss of community that came with desegregation.

Some felt that this crisis was the beginning of the end of their cohesive communities. Often, these were working class people who felt the city turned into a city for the wealthy and privileged.

One woman who came to a screening talked about her experience as someone who was opposed to the desegregation of South Boston High School. In her experience it was the beginning of the end of her community. We were struck by her saying with a combination of resentment and resignation, “Now I think they’re just waiting to turn it (South Boston High) into condos.” When we visited her some months later, we saw that her modest home in South Boston sat among expensive cars and “luxury” buildings. Her family had all lived together in that one house and is now dispersed far and wide. Her old friends were gone. Her resistance had been about wanting to be with her family and friends in the same neighborhood. Her now grown daughter talked about her search for quality schools and real community for her own children.

Similar sentiments were sometimes shared in the Black community. At the convening our project held of people of African descent at Freedom House, people talked about the vibrancy of the Black community in the 70’s – the politics, the arts, the sense of identity. They too spoke of a loss of community that they saw come as a result of the busing/desegregation crisis. It was hearing these stories that really made us want to understand more about class and how class stratification between that time and now has impacted people’s sense of community.

Historian Bernice Johnson Reagan once said, “If, in moving through your life, you find yourself lost, go back to the last place where you knew who you were, and what you were doing, and start from there.” For some Boston communities, the desegregation crisis was the last place they knew who they were as a community. This sense of loss is natural in the transitions model. As people let go of the old and are thrust into the new, grief is a huge presence. Whether real or perceived, the linking of this loss and change of community to the desegregation crisis bears exploring: it offers a place to have stories told and communities remembered, and then re-imagined.

At the same time, for some people/communities, the desegregation crisis was a time of defining and asserting their identity. At the Latino convening, people talked of the push at that time to have their language and culture honored, respected and taught. Concurrently, Chinese education activism was at a high with and sometimes in reaction to the desegregation crisis. One Cape Verdean woman suggested that the period spurred that community to sharpen its identity in the US context.

Most of us do not even know the stories and histories of these communities’ links to and context of this period. Whatever the context, some strengthening of relationships within and between communities can come from remembering our strengths and struggles as diverse communities and recommitting to what we want to reclaim and what we want to release as we face today’s challenges.

### ***The Institutional Perspective***

*We have this history and we know what we see today in schools (as a result of it). My question is, what can we do so that we will not continue to participate in and or support the damage that continues to have a terrible impact on youth of color? (BPHC)*



*Today we may not have that level of busing and community outrage, but neither do we have the level of equitable access to quality education for all students. (BPS)*

Several times people working directly in the schools as teachers or support staff broke down in tears as they pointed out parallels between race and class dynamics in public schools today with what happened during the Boston busing/desegregation crisis and at even earlier points in the struggle for equity. Some shared their sense that many impoverished children and children of color were not a lot better off today than students in the 70's when the changes were made. They told stories of increasing need and decreasing resources for Boston's most marginalized students and families despite their and other's hard work to deliver equity, access and excellence. They still see tremendous inequity and disparities as well as diminishing commitment to investing in addressing them. They expressed distress that we, as a city and a society, are going backwards in our commitment to invest the resources to have equity for all. The distress over these issues today and the certainty of their links to our desegregation history calls us to learn more about the connection between then and now.

Another place where we encountered distress at the institutional level was from education activists, community activists, and educators trying to bring change to the public school system's institutions. As they listened to stories our project shared of people who experienced Boston's busing/desegregation crisis, these activists were upset to hear that desegregation had not brought these people a better life, in spite of the original intentions of Brown v. Board of Education. Many have pointed out that deep positive changes have resulted from movements for equity and increased democracy. This recurring theme tells us that there is much we must do to mine the conflicts and contradictions as well as lift us and learn about the successes if we are ever to get to a "new beginning," as envisioned by the Transitions model: a critical mass of Boston's diverse community who are committed to equity, access, and excellence for all that so many people have worked for in the past and continue to work hard to attain.

### ***The Cultural Perspective***

*I believe it is critical for everyone to understand the history our schools and communities have come from to better understand how we can move forward. (EASJ)*

*This changed my perception/understanding of the word "busing." I hadn't realized just how loaded that word was (and still is) for many people, that it reduced a search for access to quality schools to an act of transportation. (BPS)*

*What really impacts me is the fact that even a film like this [Can We Talk?] which is done so well doesn't include our [Asian] voice. So I don't know where to take this discussion. I'm glad that we're starting it here but it's not at the policy table, it's not on the community level. We discuss it in our community but it doesn't go out to the larger Boston community. (Participant in BBDP community convening in Chinatown)*

Another layer of trauma or distress was at the cultural level. People who were or were not here at the time were often very upset that their real history of this time was not included in the story usually told about this era. We encountered anger from some communities and peoples that their histories, realities



and contributions were so marginalized – invisible even – as the city analyzed, then and now, its problems and suggested solutions. Some were enraged about the way problems were and are defined.

As previously discussed, some Black people and Latinos who had been education activists during the busing/desegregation era hated our use of the term “busing.” They thought we colluded with a white-washing of history by using that terminology, because they saw the starting point as the historical struggle for quality education regardless of race, class, gender, language, or special needs. The frustration at having to see the pervasiveness of a term that so misrepresented their struggle or the city’s conflict was symbolic of the way certain histories get rewritten or ignored.

Some Irish Americans and other whites were suspicious of the project because we spoke of racism. They saw their communities and people scapegoated and stereotyped as “the racists” who didn’t want Black people in their neighborhoods. They felt more “liberal” and privileged whites pointed the finger at them without owning and examining their own racism. One man shared his anger that on several occasions whites from the wealthy suburbs would, upon hearing he was from South Boston, bombard him with racist jokes, assuming he shared their bigotry. While some owned the racism – either as behavior they did or views they still hold – others opposed desegregation as the beginning of the end of their cohesive working-class or middle-class communities and shared culture.

Broadly defined Asian and Latino communities that the project has begun to reach (primarily Chinese American and Puerto Rican), were eager to share their experiences of the desegregation crisis—their struggle to maintain their language, cultures, and communities.

All communities shared differences within “their people” or “their communities,” and even differences about who is included. For many, there was a loss of cohesive community and culture that came with desegregation that they have never been able to fully mourn, and that they see hurting the current generation—especially working class and poor youth. One man reflecting on poor neighborhoods said that while today he sees Black youth slaying each other, he sees white youth being lost to addiction and suicide in critical numbers.

Clearly, trauma, distress and dis-ease from and about this era is not limited to those who were present and directly involved: it ripples out into all areas of the life of the city whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. What we heard was not that everyone was impacted by this era or that people were only negatively affected. But on hearing others or sharing their own trauma, distress or dis-ease, many affirmed that this history is still with us and needs to be acknowledged and included in our understanding to really move forward together.

## V. CONNECTING THE PAST TO TODAY AND THE FUTURE

***Many of the social, political and economic problems that the legally trained [Brown vs. Board of Education] social engineers thought the court had addressed through Brown are still deeply embedded in our society.*** --Lani Guinier, *From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma*

Few – whether resisters or proponents – deny that the country went through a profound change when public schools were legally desegregated and other arenas of public life opened up. We have heard wide agreement that many of the challenges we are facing today in public education are impacted by that history.

The majority of people we've talked to make direct connections between public education challenges then and now, and feel that fundamental issues not addressed then are undermining progress today. Others are so overwhelmed by current challenges that they do not want to take time looking back at old unresolved issues. Many who have benefitted most from the changes feel Boston has moved on: that this history no longer affects the city or their lives. Others who were directly involved in the violence have not seen radical changes in the quality of their lives, starting with the education of their children. They do not believe the impact of this era has been acknowledged or addressed.

The various relationships to the history correspond to the Transitions model. The resistance to desegregation and increased democratization of the country – i.e., having more and more of our diverse population have a say in where we are going and how, as a city or nation – has been at least as powerful as the advancement of it, and this has contributed to the polarization in public politics we see today.

BBDP is committed to making this complex history accessible to a wide cross section of the city. As we uncover the history and learn from the wealth of community and academic resources in this area, we see much that can help people fulfill their commitment to public education and to race and class equity in the city regardless of where they stand in relation to the history.

We've always held as a goal that exploring this history could help us all learn more about our current reality and teach us some important lessons to move forward. We've been affirmed in this conviction in

### KEY CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEN AND NOW

- The trauma for individuals living in the city today is real and impacts their choices and how they live in the city.
- Race and class inequities persist in the city despite many changes.
- People continue to experience community instability and a sense of powerlessness over how their communities are changing.
- There is a continued unequal distribution of educational resources and political power. The achievement gap persists and some people want more access to city government.
- Questions related to access to education and the role of government continue to be deep issues in American society.

the past year, as people have insisted that connecting the past to today is the central way this project can be useful and relevant to people's lives. It is imperative to take the time to look systemically at the crisis and to learn together about its complexity and its impact today. From our first year conversations, we believe it is the only way we can come to a new place instead of pointing fingers at different parts of the school system (teachers, administrators, unions) or city leadership or parents or people with limited resources or other community members. We've come to understand these connections through the systems framework we outlined earlier: there are connections to and lessons from this critical point in the city's history at all levels. Based on what we've heard and learned so far, we've come to see the following connections between then and now, though we expect to learn more as the project progresses.

### ***The Individual Perspective***

*We have never healed from this. The students who suffered from this are now teachers, parents, and grandparents with kids who are now in the BPS system and feel that they are going through a modern form of the same issue that drove the Black community to challenge Boston's segregated schools in the 1970s: exclusion of their kids from getting a quality education. The pain from the past resurfaces. (EAC)*

*That experience, those kids who threw rocks on the corner, became sort of a focal point for our existence. It shaped my perspective on race relations forever; it still shapes how I view education and access in the city. (Community Convening Participant)*

At the individual level we have heard deep levels of trauma and distress from people who experienced the crisis. Some people understand their life trajectory through that experience, while others feel it resurface when they are in particular situations. As the Transitions theory of change suggests, we have found a marathon effect: some people who went through the crisis were able to make the change/move through the distress, while others are still very much experiencing it. Many of the people we have heard from that went through the crisis as young people felt a lack of agency in the process. They do not speak of being on the front lines of making change but of being stuck in the middle of larger forces over which they had little control. In addition to a direct impact on the people who experienced the crisis, people have also spoken of an intergenerational impact, where the children in families and communities most devastated by the crisis have suffered as well. Trauma, a need for recovery, and a lack of agency continue to surface as key issues for individuals.

### ***The Interpersonal/Community Perspective***

*Boston has this immense history with racial segregation and— despite Brown vs. Board of Education and the busing movement—it still seems to be prominent. Boston is a city of neighborhoods and it is no secret that the geography of these neighborhoods is telling of the race and income level of the residents that live there. (Participant in “Can We Talk?” film screening and discussion)*

Boston's communities have changed significantly since the 1970s. Whole populations of neighborhoods have shifted, with new immigrants from other countries, migrants from other parts of the country, and a whole guest population of students, many of whom will move on, are all here today. These people,

along with, of course, a younger generation, did not experience Boston's busing desegregation crisis. Communities have by and large become less isolated/insular than during that time period, yet many groups still experience the city as hostile in some way or another, whether as not safe or not welcoming. Despite discussions of the old and new Boston, many still experience racism and deep divisions in the city even as it has changed.

While the 'new Boston' is celebrated, much of the 'old Boston' continues to mourn a loss of community that they felt in the past. There is a sense that people should 'get over' past divisions of race, class and neighborhood, yet many don't feel the space has been created to do that.

***In a BBDP blog post, we discussed an op-ed by Lawrence Harmon from earlier this year:***

*Unfortunately, Harmon pits "delivering on the promise of neighborhood schools" against "getting bogged down instead in the city's racial politics." We believe that to actually deliver on the promise of high quality neighborhood schools, it is essential to understand and illuminate the city's racial and class politics so that the people of Boston have a chance to free themselves from being manipulated by those politics, and, instead work across differences to define and create the high quality schools we all want.*

As discussed earlier in this report, we also see distress and trauma connected to this crisis at a community level, as people often point to the crisis as a specific instance of a loss of community and safety in the city.

At the same time the relationship of the city

to its suburbs remains the same. The economic and racial segregation between them are repeatedly discussed, with few ideas about what may be done to disrupt these patterns. Additionally, people are experiencing gentrification in the city, with many of the disadvantaged being pushed out. Again there is a sense of community instability that people feel they have little control over.

### ***The Institutional Perspective***

*I know that one of [the] questions is how does this matter now? It matters that whenever English Language Learners are getting what they need, it means that somebody feels that they are not getting what they need. We always have this sense of the pie being cut in the wrong way, when in fact we need to grow the pie. (Community Convening Participant)*

As suggested above, there are real race and class dynamics within communities that cannot be ignored. A larger pattern of white flight may have been replaced by gentrification, but the implications are the same. People with less power continue to experience and perceive that resources are unequally distributed and power is unevenly dispersed in the city. The issues of race and class that were central to Boston's busing/desegregation crisis continue to haunt Boston's local institutions, especially city government and the school system.

Today issues of equity and access in Boston's public education system center on the continuing achievement gap, English language learners, students with special needs, and the school to prison pipeline. There are race and class issues embedded in the needs of these students which aren't

discussed openly but need to be directly addressed. Many of this year's controversies—the closing of schools particularly in communities of color, the call for “neighborhood schools” – echo the very language in the 1974 Garrity decision. Oftentimes those working most closely with the public schools today are the most distressed looking back at the Boston busing/desegregation crisis and seeing how certain patterns repeat themselves even as they work day-by-day to reverse those patterns.

At the same time questions about redrawing the city council districts suggests that questions of racial equity, power and control persist. Finally, some people we spoke to were concerned that the interests of businesses, both for profit and non-profit, and the wealthy are central to how development occurs in the city, while the needs of the poor remain secondary.

### *The Broader Cultural Perspective*

*As a young girl, I always believed that things were better for black folks “up north.” Boy was I wrong! As an adult, I have come to understand that the issue of race is not regional but one of national proportions. (GLAD)*

There was a broader social context in which Boston's busing/desegregation crisis occurred that continues to have relevance to people's lives today. Social beliefs about and trends in education, governance, and the role of business in the public sphere that came to the fore during the crisis are issues that people continue to grapple with. These issues have a particular manifestation in Boston, but are in reality national in scope. We thus learned that for many people, talking about and understanding this history and its impact involves raising critical issues we were dealing with as a nation then that continue unresolved today.

Underlying the crisis were deep questions about the role of public education and government, and who should decide: i.e., whether the answers to these questions should be arrived at democratically or be defined by those already in power who were interested in holding on to it and not sharing leadership with Boston's growing diverse community.

- Who should have access to quality education – all children or only those whose families and communities have access to power?
- What should quality education look like and include?
- Who should administer education, and who has a say in this administration?
- Should education be administered democratically, bureaucratically, or by private interests?
- How do we balance the needs of different groups in our society and distribute resources equitably?

We found that many people feel these questions were being asked and answered, then and now, behind closed doors by people with the power to address them, leaving everyone else, without access to the conversation, disempowered and unable to engage and challenge important issues confronting them, and to help shape a public education system that would work for all.

## APPLYING THE LESSONS OF THE PAST TO THE PRESENT: SCHOOL ASSIGNMENT

***First, any conversation around school assignment should be historically rooted.*** Though the city has changed considerably over the past 40 years, the pain from this time period still runs deep throughout the city. The children and even grandchildren of people impacted by this crisis have grown up with this pain and have a relationship with the schools based on it. At the same time, there are community members who see this period as a necessary struggle that provided equity and equal access to opportunities to learn for their children. Parents fought hard in federal court to attain these opportunities. The city needs to take seriously the complexities of the busing/desegregation era rather than avoid it or shrug it off. This means recognizing not only the trauma of violence, but also of interrupted educational trajectories, loss of community, feelings of betrayal and misunderstanding, and marginalization. It also means learning from what's worked. For many residents of Boston, their feelings about schools and school assignment have been deeply influenced by these experiences.

***Second, school assignment is intricately connected to questions of the equitable distribution of resources and quality schools across the city.*** No parent wants to hear that their child has to go to a school considered inferior in the name of fairness, and individual families will do whatever is necessary to send their kids to the best schools they can. No one can blame them for this. This means we need a citywide structure to make sure that all families, especially the most vulnerable among us, can access the resources necessary to get a good education for their children. Because students concentrated in low-income schools tend to perform poorly and because achievement gaps between both white children and children of color and poor and wealthy kids persist, we cannot ignore the realities of racial and economic segregation in our city. Any honest conversation about neighborhood-based schooling in Boston will need to take a hard look at residential segregation, the concentration of poverty in Boston, and how to distribute resources more equitably to address it. Yes, neighborhoods have changed, but real inequities still exist among us – and need to be acknowledged and addressed

***Third, discussions around school assignment must involve stakeholders in a real and meaningful way. This means privileging the voices and participation of those who will be most impacted: the families who do not have the resources to send their children anywhere but the Boston Public Schools.*** These are the families who will have to pick up the pieces if the proposed change in school assignment goes awry. It is not enough to simply include a few of them on a committee or in a conversation – they should be central to the dialogue and decision making process. This may mean slowing down the process – these are often, after all, the very families who faced the trauma of the busing/desegregation crisis almost 40 years ago.

## VI. DOING THE WORK

Our experiences in the past year have taught us not only about what people think and know about the crisis, but how the past resonates in the present. We have also learned a great deal about doing this work that informs how we function daily and how we envision moving forward. We thus think it is

important to share these lessons and insights with our community.

### DOING THIS WORK

While the initial idea for this project was a simple one, doing this work is inevitably complex. We have spent the past year learning about different approaches and discovering the tensions we have to hold to make this project work.

**Truth-Seeking:** We have moved from the idea of truth and reconciliation to seeing this project as a truth-seeking process.

**Building Community around the Crisis:** We have encountered considerable challenges in working with communities around this issue. People across the city have very different needs, desires and perspectives around this issue. We are learning to work with these tensions and also confront the fear of talking about the crisis.

**Learning Together:** Learning together is a process of engagement that involves discovering who we are, where there are places of mutual interest and desires for change. We all have something to teach and something to learn.

The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project (BBDP) was designed as a community-driven process. Many have described it as something like trying to build a bicycle while riding it. This is because we are learning with and from people about the best way to address this history. This has been frustrating for some, and a major learning this year is that we need to get better at communicating our thinking, goals, and concrete outcomes for the project as they evolve, while still allowing for flexibility and community input. This is not an easy balance, but we are learning. Our lessons from the year fall broadly under three categories: truth-seeking processes, community building around busing/desegregation, and community learning processes.

### Truth-Seeking Processes

*Social truth is always contested and negotiated: it is based on multiple narratives and reflects power structures. ---Eduardo Gonzalez, International Center for Transitional Justice*

*In the past few decades, dealing with the past has gained an increasing salience as a key component of a broader strategy in building a culture of human rights, confronting impunity, and strengthening democratic institutions. Of the many strategies to deal with the past, the idea of truth-telling – uncovering the truth behind a previous period often characterized by both violence and secrecy – has become particularly important. ---Louis Bickford, International Center for Transitional Justice*

We have heard time and again that what BBDP has set out to do is in many ways unprecedented. This makes it



both exciting and nerve-wracking work. In many ways we are both building the bicycle and paving the road. Yet, there are some strong models that we are learning from and believe we can piece together to do this work. We started as a ‘truth and reconciliation’ project. As we learned more about truth and reconciliation initiatives around the world, we understood that what we aim for has more in common with unofficial truth processes, since ours is not a government commissioned process, and our focus is on learning, community building, and change rather than reconciliation. We are more interested in creating a new future and in making larger systemic change. Also, traditional truth and reconciliation projects privilege the voices of the victims, and we are addressing a more complex situation. Because the city has changed so much, it is not only the ‘victims’, that need to be defined and go through this process with us and learn from this past. Through this learning we began to call our project a ‘truth-seeking process.’ We still have more work to do, especially leading into the next phase of our work, to identify what the truth process will include and who will be involved and how.

### **Building Community around Boston’s Busing/Desegregation Crisis**

We have spent the past year hoping to build relationships in communities across the city. This has been, not surprisingly, a challenging effort. While people recognize the importance of the project, it can be difficult to dedicate limited time and resources. Academic institutions and individuals have the most flexibility in this regard. Community-based organizations have varying degrees of capacity to connect with us. At the same time, communities across the city have varying levels of community-based non-profits with strong connections. City government structures also dominate civic life, and many people have told us they cannot connect directly with us because their organizations are run by the city. Related to this challenge is the overall climate in the city with regards to Boston’s image and reputation – some would prefer to put forth a positive, welcoming image and fear that revisiting this era may harm that effort. A final issue with the non-profit model is that many people directly impacted by this era and the issues surrounding it are not directly connected to community organizations. We have found many of these people through personal connections, which is slow work that requires significant relationship building.

The period we are trying to explore is arguably the lowest point in Boston’s modern history. People talked a lot about the fear and rage that filled the city during the busing/desegregation crisis. There were stories of how battles around schools spread tensions throughout the city. Many are ashamed that this period has been such a blight on the city’s reputation. People from other parts of the country were shocked that such conflict and resistance could happen in Boston, which was known as liberal and intellectual.

Because of the shame many felt about this period, some feared bringing it up again. They shared with us privately that some in power and leadership today do not want to look back at this history because of the importance to them of moving past that reputation to secure the city’s future. As a result, a few individuals and organizations expressed fear of being connected with an effort trying to speak honestly about a difficult subject – the inequities of race, class, and power – in the city’s past and present.

Others feared that certain communities or individuals would be scapegoated and vilified. They did not trust that the process would really respect and hear everyone. It was fascinating, but not surprising, to



find the project that was trying to learn from the fear of the past found itself caught in people's fears of today.

A core part of the work of BBDP is to acknowledge and address fear—our own about taking on such a complex and immense project, as well as the fears of those we encounter who we deeply desire to invite, teach, and learn with us. As Naomi Tutu warned at the seating of a truth and reconciliation commission in Detroit, "The part that shames us *and* the part that makes us proud is our story. If we're striving for justice and wholeness, we must have the whole truth, the whole story. History can teach us if we listen to history. In the U.S., we have a sense of history as being what makes us proud. If it doesn't make us proud, we don't want to hear it. To skip this is a disservice to history and a disservice to ourselves."

Another challenge in building relationships stems directly from deep-rooted divisions in the city that this project aims to address. Many perceive our parent organization, the Union of Minority Neighborhoods, to be a 'black' organization and thus too biased to take on an issue that speaks directly to the city's racial divides. People in certain neighborhoods, especially (but certainly not only) whites from South Boston and Charlestown, feel that they have been continually demonized and misrepresented in the longstanding narrative of the busing/desegregation crisis, and don't necessarily trust us as 'outsiders' attempting to retell this story once again, especially from an organization interested in racial justice. We have recognized from the beginning that an honest and open accounting of these voices would be key to the project, yet continue to struggle to engage them. We strive to acknowledge where we are coming from, but at the same time continue to attempt to build those relationships and contend that we are interested in an open and honest discussion, one which can only be built through time and the careful cultivation of relationships.

Finally, we have found that the relationship of the people of Boston to the busing/desegregation crisis and era is layered and complex. There are tensions between the needs of:

- People who went through it and those who didn't
- Those who see a direct connection to that time and those who don't
- Older and younger generations
- People involved in politics and those not
- People directly impacted by the underlying issues and those distant from the underlying issues
- Those with kids in the school system and those outside of it
- City dwellers and suburbanites
- People promoting the progress the city has made and those pointing out the work that still needs to be done

The challenge for BBDP is to hold all these overlapping and layered groups, needs and understandings together, as they all constitute the city we live in today.

## ***Learning Together***

*History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again. ---Maya Angelou*

Learning and learning together permeates all parts of the project. Learning together is a process of engagement. It involves discovering who we are, where there are places of mutual interest and desires for change. The process must include exploring what each party can bring and is bringing to the learning and the search for new strategies for change. Parties must seek together opportunities and openings for forward movement.

We heard innumerable perspectives on the Boston Busing/Desegregation crisis. There are also wide variations in people's knowledge of the era. Individuals, organizations, and communities have brought very different understandings of the era to BBDP's gatherings. No one person or body holds the full complexity of this history. It is clear that *all* have something to teach *and* something to learn.

Many directly involved in the school system felt they rarely have enough time to step back and reflect systemically. Understandably, they are "in it" and their time is spent addressing the day-to-day challenges and responding or reacting to many demands or emergencies. Many of those who are more on the periphery of the school system feel while they may be marginally included in identifying problems, they do not have a way to meaningfully participate in crafting and participating in solutions.

There is much to be learned from having representatives of the many perspectives think systemically together about what it meant to go from a legally segregated school system and society to "desegregation", what it meant for certain segments of the city to be given limited options in how that happened and how those people experienced the impact on their lives and their children.

For us, the project is "public education" for all of us. It is a chance for us to study our own city together. We do this without an agenda or specific problem we're trying to fix but with an intention to build our capacity to address what Ronald Heifitz calls adaptive challenges. These are challenges that:

- Are difficult to identify and easy to deny
- Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, & approaches to work
- Need three people with the problem to do the work of solving it
- Require change in numerous places – often crossing boundaries
- We often resist even acknowledging
- Require experiments and new discoveries to develop solutions that can take along time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict

The more we learn, the more we see that the challenges of equity, access, and excellence in public education are extremely complicated and this history adds many layers of complexity. It can be daunting at times. But as our Learning Network faces these challenges, we also see that valuing and delving into that complexity together gives us many ideas and opportunities to develop our abilities to be effective change agents.

## VII. MOVING FORWARD

The Boston Busing/Desegregation Project has just finished the first phase of its work, which sought to accomplish three key goals: 1) introduce the project to the city and discover whether people believe the project is important to do, 2) set a context for the project by having people and communities share their relationship to the history the project seeks to examine, and 3) invite people, communities, and school and city leadership to join us in drawing lessons from this history that can be used today to build a world-class public education system and city of opportunity for all.

This report has tried to capture what the project has learned since its launch in June 2011 with the first screening and public discussion of its film *Can We Talk?* What a year of showing and supporting discussion of the film in communities and organizations across the city has taught us is this: how many people who experienced the Boston busing/desegregation crisis are still deeply impacted, and even traumatized, by it; how many people have never talked about their experiences and are hungry to do so; how others have never talked about their experiences and are fearful of doing so; and how many who didn't experience the crisis are aware of its impacts on people, communities, schools, and the city. The year has taught us that lots of people want to talk about these issues but find it difficult to do so and say they are unaware of places to turn to for support. They believe the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project is important to do if it can help meet this vital need in Boston – create safe spaces to bring people together to have honest conversations about three things: 1) the busing/desegregation history and its impacts; 2) inequities of race, class, power, and community resources that continue to divide this city; and 3) a vision for what a world-class public education system for all and a city of opportunity for all looks like. A key learning from phase one is to place discussions of equity, access, and excellence at the center of our work going forward.

Our project will use what we learned this year to inform the next phase of our work. It will focus on story collection in Boston's neighborhoods and dialogue across differences within Boston's major cultural community. We will collect stories from these communities to develop a people's history of the Boston busing/desegregation crisis and its impact, and then distill and share what we learn from these

### THE COMING YEAR

We want to create space for three interrelated conversations:

1. the busing/desegregation history and its impacts;
2. inequities of race, class, power, and community resources that continue to divide this city; and
3. a vision for what a world-class public education system for all and a city of opportunity for all looks like.

This year we will:

- Document stories related to Boston's busing/desegregation era.
- Support dialogue within Boston's communities.

stories to inform our project and the city. We will also pilot a dialogue project within these communities to achieve three key goals: support participants to engage in dialogue across their differences, foster understanding and healing, and gain deeper understanding of their community and the city – what led up to and happened during the busing/desegregation crisis, its impact, and the community’s priorities today. Our project will use the results of the second phase to inform the design of phase three, which will focus on inter-community dialogue to build shared understanding of our past, our present, and the future we want for public education and the city of Boston. The fourth phase of our work will focus on supporting the people of Boston to take action to achieve their vision and priorities for change.

## APPENDIX

### **Presentations of BBDP and *Can We Talk?***

Academy of the Pacific Rim  
ASPIRE teacher Mentors  
Associated Grantmakers education group  
Black Ministerial Alliance (BMA)  
Boston Educators for Social Justice (BESJ)  
Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC)  
Boston Public Schools (BPS)  
Boston YWCA  
Brighton Congregational Church  
Chinese Historical Society  
Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center  
Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project-  
Northeastern School of Law  
Codman Square  
Cohasset Diversity Committee  
Commonwealth of Mass. Dept. of Industrial  
Accidents  
Community Change, Inc (CCI)  
Dimock Recovery Program  
East Boston- Neighborhood of Affordable  
Housing  
Freedom House  
Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders  
Haley House-Art is Life Itself  
Harvard Graduate School of Education  
IBA – Villa Victoria  
LEAD Boston  
Lesley University  
Lucy Parsons -  
Mass General Hospital  
Massachusetts Commission against  
Discrimination  
Mission Main Community Center  
National Forum for Black Public Administrators-  
Boston Chapter  
Needham- Pollard Middle School PTC

Northeastern University School of Education  
Old South Church  
Primary Source  
Project Hope  
Simmons College  
South Bay House of Corrections staff  
Springfield College  
Teachers Activist Group  
Trinity Church  
Tufts University  
University of Massachusetts Boston  
Urban League young professionals  
Wheelock College

### **Partners:**

Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project-NESL  
Boston YWCA  
UMass Boston  
Trotter Institute  
One Nation Indivisible

### **Steering Committee:**

Ann Moritz  
Barbara Lewis  
Ceasar McDowell  
Curdina Hill  
Dave Jenkins  
Francis Roache  
Gail Burton  
Janine Quarles  
Paula Elliott  
Rebecca Shuster

**Steering Committee (cont):**

Rosa L. Hunter  
Sandras Barnes  
Scott Mercer  
Sharlene Cochrane  
Sherry Brooks Roberts  
Sylvia Wright  
Tom Louie

**Program Committee:**

Barbara Lewis  
Gail Burton  
Jose Lopez  
Kathleen Kelly  
Padriac Farma  
Paula Parnagian  
Rosa L. Hunter  
Rebecca Shuster  
Sharlene Cochrane

**Learning Network Committee:**

Curdina Hill  
Paula Elliott  
Sherry Brooks Roberts  
Marlene G. Fine  
Robbie McCauley  
Wilbur Herrington

**Communications, Organizing Outreach Committee:**

Ann Moritz  
Francis Roache  
Tom Louie

**UMN Executive Director:**

Horace Small

**Report Writers:**

Donna Bivens  
Meghan Doran  
Jacqui Lindsay

**Report Contributors:**

Polly Attwood  
Sandras Barnes  
Paula Elliot  
Chris Gallagher  
Meck Groot  
Curdina Hill  
Rosa Hunter  
Joan Lancourt  
Ann Moritz  
Amara Nwosu  
Natasha Wilson

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