

Q&amp;A

# Half-Steps and Abandonment: The Failure to Integrate NYC Schools

In “The Battle Nearer to Home: The Persistence of School Segregation in New York City,” Lehman College professor, and DJ, Christopher Bonastia looks at the history of school desegregation efforts and the reasons behind their failures.

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A protest against cuts to public school funding in August 2022. (Hell Gate)



By Alana Mohamed



The New York City school system, though legally desegregated since 1900, is regularly cited as [one of the most segregated in the country](#). In a [January speech](#), announcing David C. Banks as his schools chancellor, Mayor Eric Adams nodded to “longstanding inequities” that have plagued the city’s education system.

The deep roots of school segregation in NYC are not lost on the city’s mayor. “I felt these inequities firsthand 40 years ago, as a boy growing up in South Jamaica, Queens, being bussed every day to Bayside High School,” he explained. Yet, in the face of these inequities, the COVID pandemic, rising Monkeypox cases, and the

[sudden reappearance of polio](#), the Adams administration and the city council are [poised to enact sizable budget cuts to city schools](#), cuts that further sort children into winners and losers.

In New York, one-sided integration efforts like the busing Adams experienced helped exacerbate the city's deeply uneven school system, by placing the burden on students of color to travel long distances or transfer schools to receive quality education. As Christopher Bonastia, Chair of Sociology at Lehman College and a professor at the Graduate Center, outlines in his new book, [The Battle Nearer to Home: The Persistence of School Segregation in New York City](#), bussed students were sometimes met with hostility from both white parents and educators, while the Board of Education, in an effort to avoid controversy, failed to provide much support.

Bonastia, who has a son in high school in New York, illustrates a long history of integration efforts that were often stymied by parents, politicians, the teachers union, and the bureaucracy of the Board, connecting today's calls for integration to the radical and divisive community control experiments of the 1970s. (A former DJ, he also created a [soundtrack](#) to accompany the book.) With budget cuts on the horizon, integration advocates face new challenges, and as *The Battle Nearer to Home* demonstrates, school officials have rarely treated the case of segregation in city schools with the urgency it deserves. As Bonastia told me, "I wanted to make sure that folks knew that school segregation is not a Southern story, that this has been and is a nationwide issue."

*The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

### **What was the impact of *Brown vs. Board of Education* on New York City schools and how did New York tackle integration?**

There was, from the Board of Education, a lot of self-congratulations, saying, "This is great. We are certainly going to do our best to continue our quest of greater integration, but we are not a segregated school system. Yes, there are racially distinct schools, but that's because of housing patterns, we can't control that. So this ruling is great and we are going to abide by the spirit of it." But really not doing much in practical terms.

I think the Board of Education's goal was to manage integration in order to maintain predominantly white schools that white parents would feel relatively comfortable sending their children to. To do that, you need a much larger number of segregated Black and Brown schools. I think their rationale was often that we have got to keep white families here because we're not going to be able to integrate if more and more leave. It's gonna become harder and harder. So, you had a school system that was 68 percent white in 1957, by 1967 it was less than half white, now we're at about 14 percent or 15 percent.

### **It seemed like New York City integration efforts at times held larger implications in the fight to desegregate the South. Could you talk a bit about why both Southern segregationists and organizations like the NAACP might have had their eye on New York's public schools?**

Southern segregationists often pointed to the school and housing segregation that existed in New York and other large cities as a means of exposing Northern hypocrisy. Essentially, Southern segregationists questioned why liberal

Northerners ignored segregation in their own backyards as they critiqued Southern-style segregation.

Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP, worried at times that public focus on segregation in the New York City school system would distract attention from the effort to dismantle school systems that had been segregated by law in the South. He believed the Southern effort was more important. He also likely felt that the moral and legal case for dismantling Southern segregation was easier to make.

**When we talk about segregation in NYC, what does that look like? What are the conditions students are facing?**

What that looks like, is you have this group of schools—let’s talk about at the high school level—that, if you walk in, you would say, “Wow, this school is really integrated.” It might be 50 percent white, 15 percent Asian, 15 percent Black, 15 percent Latinx. But, in a school system where about two-thirds of the students are Black or Latinx, to have those schools, it means you have to have a much bigger number of schools that are basically all Black and Brown students.

In the book I try to capture what the long, exhausting, and ongoing quest for racial justice in schools felt like to those who were fighting for it: the determination, the exasperation, the frustration, and the sense of community that comes with waging an uphill struggle. One of the reasons I recorded the companion album was to capture more of what it felt like.

If you listen to the first song, “How’d Ya Get Here?” my friend Bree is talking about attending a co-located school in Midtown in the Washington Irving Campus. New York City has a lot of these school arrangements where you might have six separate schools in one building. And so, she says in the beginning of the song, there was this hierarchy. She talks about her school and the other schools in the building being mostly Black and Brown, but if a white student came in, they’d be like, “What happened?”

The expectation was that something must have gone wrong, this student should be in a better school, and this student’s probably a lot smarter than us, because they’re probably better prepared. Students are tuned into the hierarchy of schools in the system. Bree says she saw this hierarchy as a class system, and she was always at the bottom. One of the unfortunate outcomes of this system is that students often blame themselves for not gaining admission to one of their desired schools. Several youth activists whom I interviewed said they concluded, “Maybe I’m not smart enough,” when they were not admitted to the schools they hoped to attend. And that to me was really striking.

**What are some of the factors that go into this type of segregation, where it might look like an integrated school, but students are receiving different services, or have different opportunities available to them?**

I talk about what I call bordered checkpoints in the book, these strategies that the Board of Education, now the Department of Education, use to manage integration. There were physical checkpoints, which basically had to do with school zoning and siting of schools. The city was building a lot of new schools and where you place them has a big impact, of course, on the racial demographics of those schools. Certainly, at the time, Black parents would often push for schools not to be built right in the middle of segregated areas. Sometimes the Board



not to be built right in the middle of segregated areas. Sometimes the board would listen, most of the time not. The truth was that if activists got one school re-sited, there would be 10 more that just went through.

There are also administrative checkpoints. With the Commission on Integration and more recently de Blasio's [School Diversity Advisory Group](#), there's all this time spent coming up with recommendations about how we're going to increase integration, and then the report is delayed, it finally comes out, and it basically gets buried in a desk drawer. Then a few years later, they say, "Oh, we're going to study this," and the whole cycle continues.

And then the last checkpoint, which I think has become the main strategy to manage integration, is this meritocratic checkpoint. Basically, we're going to screen students in a race-blind way, and if it happens that some schools are mostly white, or now largely white and Asian, and some schools are mostly Black and Brown, that's just what happens.

And, of course, that system builds on itself. If students by race are going to different quality elementary schools, then they're going to be sorted into different middle schools and into different high schools. Some say screens like the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) are fair and race-blind, but if you have some students who have been to middle schools where they have done this work and learned this material, and some have not, that's not really a fair fight.

**In the face of these checkpoints, what were the tools that Black and Brown parents used to make their voices heard, if not actually create some change. How did they fight for integration?**

I think the 1964 School Boycott [in which over 464,000 students abstained from attending class in protest of the Board of Education's lack of meaningful integration plans] was the culmination of direct action protest, so that was one element. Certainly, they had a lot of meetings with school officials. Probably the most concessions they got was leading up to the '64 one-day boycott. School officials would throw them bones at times, "Okay, we're gonna start this open enrollment plan where, if your child goes to an overcrowded school that's segregated, then they can apply to be admitted to a basically underutilized school." That would, in most cases, result in integration. But the Board of Education would say, "This is not about integration, don't worry, white parents. This is just about making use of space."

**The 1964 School Boycott was an example of the coalition that formed between Black parents and Puerto Rican parents. How were Puerto Rican students counted in the conversation around integration or measurements of integration? What was the process of them forming a coalition with Black parents and students?**

Puerto Rican students were, I think, largely counted in the way the Board of Education found convenient at the time. In one of the community control districts, at IS 201 in Harlem, one of the incidents that got parents really fired up was when District Superintendent Daniel Schreiber claimed that the school would be integrated because it was half-Black and half-Puerto Rican. Puerto Rican parents, I think, started to realize that if they didn't get involved in how they were counted and seen, then they would be exploited. One of the difficult things in researching this book, especially looking at the '60s, is that Puerto Rican folks were sometimes



this book, especially looking at the busses, is that Puerto Rican folks were sometimes considered Black, sometimes they may be considered white, they may be considered a separate group, or they're just kind of ignored. When certain folks were talking about Black students, it was not always clear if they were including Puerto Rican students in their statements.

**You talk about these various measures, whether it be redistricting or busing, that sometimes resulted in some form of integration. How did white parents react, and what was the Board of Education's response?**

Glendale-Ridgewood in 1959 was really striking. One of the reasons it was striking was because it was such a reasonable proposition. The plan was to take these kids who were in overcrowded schools on double sessions in Bed-Stuy and bus them one to three miles to schools in Glendale-Ridgewood that were severely underutilized.

White parents protested and picketed. Their first claim was, "This is our school. We believe we're not racist, we believe in neighborhood schools." And the Black students who transferred were 8 to 10 years old. Glendale-Ridgewood parents feared that this group of "juvenile delinquents" would wreck their schools. They would claim, kind of falsely, that, "Well, our concern is really for these children. This will be a strange place to them, it's so tiring to be on a bus for two miles each way, they can't go home for lunch."

One of the most outrageous things, I think, from Glendale-Ridgewood parents was their claim that recent European immigrants would be really uncomfortable. Shouldn't Black folks who've been here for generations have a bit more of a claim on finding schools that work for them, than the discomfort of this new group that has just come in?

Canarsie had been a problem spot for years. One of the really interesting dynamics in the early '70s was these parents who had, for a long time, said, "We are not racist, we just oppose busing," for a time tried to get Russian-Jewish folks who lived in Brighton Beach to send their kids to school there or move there. The Board of Education often tried to play both sides and, many times, satisfied no one.

**Could you briefly explain the school pairing model and how white parents reacted to that proposition?**

The idea behind pairing is that you would combine two nearby schools—one primarily Black and one primarily white—to achieve integration. For example, you would assign all students in K-3 to one school, and all students in grades 4-6 to the other.

About a quarter of a million white families boycotted the first day of the 1964-65 school year to protest pairing at four sets of elementary schools. In Jackson Heights, Queens, one of the pairing sites, white parents created a private school, the first one created in the North to avoid desegregation. They also occupied their old school—the one their children were no longer assigned to. One white mother told her child to spit at a Board of Education staff member who had traveled to the school to keep the peace. Supporters of the white parents flattened the tire of a police van and tried to pull the wires from its engine.

**It seems like Black and Brown parents were in this real rough spot. When the**

**conversation turned to community control, what were they hoping that would accomplish? Were they turning their backs on integration as a whole?**

I think folks were fed up with the way integration was practiced—one in having to constantly push the board and local school districts to do something; two, for Black and Puerto Rican students, ones who did transfer to mostly white schools were sometimes treated with a lot of hostility by both students and teachers. So I think certainly one prong is that integration as practiced was not working. And the school system was not trying to make it work.

Related to that, parents were fed up with what they called one-way integration. It was always Black and Puerto Rican students who were being bused or transferring schools. One of the reasons that school pairing in 1964 made white parents go crazy was because, for the first time, white students were being transferred for integration.

In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, community control started with local parents saying, “We have no voice on our local school board. We went to them, and they basically ignored us. So why don’t you, the Board of Ed, let us control this group of schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville?” I think part of that had been this feeling building up throughout the years that many teachers didn’t care about their Black and Brown students and didn’t believe they could learn. They felt that you’re not going to change these schools unless you change these teachers.

It was really interesting during that transition, for a time, parents in Harlem were saying, “We demand integration *or* total community control. Give us one of these. We will take either, we just want something that works and serves our children.”

**The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) was not very friendly to this idea that the community would have control over who is teaching their children. Why was that? How did they frame the issue of community control?**

They were 100 percent hostile to it. Basically, they felt that it would weaken union power. If you had these different local boards, they could both fire teachers and hire new ones according to less rigid methods than existed at the time—where applicants would take a test and a school would have to choose from the three individuals with the highest ranking scores, even if they seemed like a poor fit for the school—the way they framed it was that these local community boards open the doors for white racists excluding Black teachers, and Black racists excluding white teachers, and so on. I talk a lot in the book about accusations of anti-semitism because a large percentage of the teaching force at the time was Jewish, as were a large portion of administrators. So it was certainly framed as a fight against racism, a fight against anti-semitism. I don’t believe that was the core issue. Al Shanker, the head of the UFT, cynically exploited and inflated claims of anti-Semitism and anti-white racism to get the white public on the union’s side. [He admitted as much in the late ‘80s.](#)

**The core issue in your mind was union power?**

Yeah. The union was just coming into its own as a force and they were not willing to give up any power. Briefly going back to the Commission on Integration, one of the core proposals was to have mandatory rotation of teachers. The idea being that the least experienced teachers were in low-income schools and the most experienced and best ones were in the middle class, mostly white schools, so we

want to have these really good teachers also in the low income schools. Teacher groups were like, “No way, we’re not doing that.” We still have that issue now, where there are much less experienced teachers at low-income segregated schools.

**Could you talk a little bit about what power these community control boards actually had over their districts and the teachers that were hired?**

One of the real issues was their authority was not clearly spelled out. In May 1968, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board dismissed 19 UFT teachers and administrators. They basically said, “This is the option we have left. We’ve been trying to play by these fuzzy rules and we’ve gotten nowhere. We still have these hostile teachers in our classrooms, so we’re going to tell these folks they are dismissed.”

Ironically, during the UFT strikes in the fall of ‘68 and the end of spring ‘68, Ocean Hill-Brownsville had the most control over who was teaching their students. They brought in replacement teachers, it was about 70 percent white and 30 percent Black, which was a very high percentage of Black teachers at that time. But, all of the teachers were there because they wanted to be, which was a big change from what the students were used to. That was the brief period of time where there was some semblance of community control.

**What became of the community control experiments? How did they end?**

The simple way that it ended was the state legislature passed a decentralization law in the spring of ‘69, which basically broke up the community-controlled districts. The experiment didn’t last long. This goes back to this idea of administrative checkpoints. When the board would launch these experiments, they would pull the plug quickly. They’d say, “Oh it didn’t work, so we need to stop that.” So, I don’t think we really know what would have become of truly community-controlled districts. We didn’t have time to find out.

**Integration efforts slowed between the 1970s and the 2000s. During the Bloomberg administration, what changed and what conditions did that create for parents looking to place their children in integrated schools?**

A lot of what Bloomberg did was centered around this idea of school choice, which meant more screened schools. In ‘86, the city council dialed back screening and that seemed to be successful, but Bloomberg brought it right back. He also pushed for small schools like co-located schools and charters. Basically, I think the shift was from parents having some voice in how schools were run—it was, perhaps, never what it should have been—but going from a sort of voice and going toward, “You are consumers. We’re going to try to give you a good menu of choices, but you’re not really going to have a say in how these schools are all run. If you don’t like Dunkin Donuts, then check out Starbucks.”

**What were the lasting impacts of past integration efforts?**

We’re really seeing the long-term impacts of the community control experiments in this current group of integration student activists. When I was interviewing them and looking at their demands, a lot of them had roots in community control: We want a teaching staff who looks like us and shares some experiences with us; we want resources; we do want greater integration, but we realize that every school in this city is not going to look like the city as a whole. And we want a responsive



curriculum.

Ocean Hill-Brownsville is remembered as this kind of hub of Black nationalism and in some ways it was, but also the student body was about 20 percent Puerto Rican. This was really one of the first school districts to say, “We’re going to teach about Black and Puerto Rican culture and how those cultures are linked.” An elementary school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville created the first bilingual program in city schools.

I think that is one of the really enduring hallmarks of the movement, and kind of a surprising one if we think about these students now. They are saying, “We want 21st-century integration,” but a lot of their tent poles are from this movement that was seen as anti-integration.

**Can you talk a little about the flaws of looking at this numbers-based type of integration, instead of mixing cultures and ideas and meeting students where they are?**

One of the interviews I did with a member of the current generation of high school activists, she is Latinx and was a member of the group Integrate NYC. She was talking about her school experiences, having gone to mostly white schools. She said, “I couldn’t really put my finger on what was missing.” Then she did a school visit to a different school and she felt this real sense of community, both with fellow students and teachers who shared some of her experiences. She said, “That is really what I have been missing and I realized that I shouldn’t have to choose between resources and a sense of community.” That was really moving to me. It pinpointed this choice that students are faced with and shouldn’t have to. In the book, and you’ll see on Twitter too, there are students of color at screened schools who are saying, “I feel like a complete outsider here, I don’t feel a part of this school community. Folks think I’m lucky and...this sucks.”

**You talk about integration not being just a Black and white issue. Where do Asian students factor into these conversations then and then now?**

Certainly in the ‘50s through the end of the ‘60s, Asian students were a very small percentage of the school population and were rarely mentioned. (During this time, you’re also seeing talk specifically of Puerto Rican students and not of a broader Latinx group at the time.) When we’re talking about integration now, the issue is much more complex.

I draw a sort of vague parallel between Asian students now and Jewish teachers then, where in both groups, at least some voices were saying objective meritocracy protects us from unfairness, while on the other side one might say, “No this isn’t actually a meritocracy at all because what is used to rank folks is unfair and messed up and may not even be relevant.”

**Your book ends on a hopeful note, but today, what are you seeing as the conversation around integration? Are things repeating or is there progress being made?**

This stuff seems to change quickly. I had completed most of the manuscript before the July 2021 mayoral primary. If Maya Wiley, who was a co-chair of the School Diversity Advisory Group, had won the primary, there was cause for hope that the next administration would promote integration proactively. That doesn’t seem to

be in the cards for the Adams administration.

I think integration advocates wish that Mayor Eric Adams and School Chancellor David Banks were doing more. They kind of feel like, “We have been having conversation with the DOE under de Blasio and at least they kind of understood the issues,” and now they are trying to maintain what they gained. There is some hope that middle schools will continue to be unscreened going forward, and that high school screening will decrease. At the high school level, New York City remains by far the most screened school system in the country. The admissions changes are probably not going to do much unless more schools give priority admissions to students from low-income families, English language learners, students with disabilities. There are some high schools who do that voluntarily now. But many don't.



**Alana Mohamed**

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**Alana Mohamed** August 13, 2022

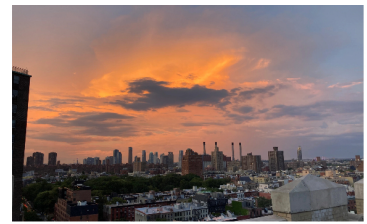
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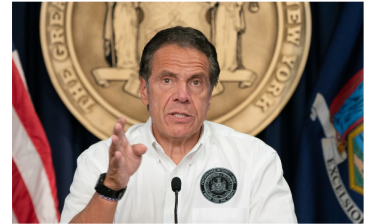
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