

Malverne's Bitter Legacy

By David C. Berliner

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MALVERNE, L. I. —The busing issue may be boiling over in the nation's courts, in Congress, and along the Presidential campaign trail, but to the residents of this area, the controversy is nothing new.

Ten rancor-filled years ago, the patchwork Union Free School District 12, which takes in 6,000 families' portions of Malverne, Lynbrook and Lakeview, was divided on the broader issue: racial balance in the school system.

The district was the first in the state to be ordered to achieve balance. Busing was a natural offshoot.

Today, much of what took place in the years that followed seems remote, even insignificant, to many of those who were principals in the drama. Some, such as then-State Commissioner of Education James Allen, have died. Others have moved away. And still others discuss the past grateful for the benefit of hindsight.

In many cases, friendships between whites and blacks have faded away, amplifying between the races a gap that seemed too wide at the controversy's height. What re-examination that is present seems to be minimal and most often is described as strained.

Of the three lower -middle -class to upper -middle -class communities that make up the district, Lynbrook and Malverne are virtually all white, Lakeview all black.

In the early 1960's, the three elementary schools reflected the racial composition of the sections in which they were situated, particularly the crowded Woodfield Road School in Lakeview whose enrollment bordered on 90 per cent black.

This year, as it has been since 1968, the Woodfield Road building is not being used for classes. All black youngsters now attend the two elementary schools in the white neighborhoods and there is a technical and legal balance within the system.

There remains pervasive, however, the realization that the bitterness of the last 10 years may have been unnecessary and misdirected.

“We tried to relieve the overcrowding by requesting, unsuccessfully, that some of the black kids be sent to the other elementary schools,” Burbank Mitchell, a postal employe who lives with his wife in an attractive two-story home at the end of a quiet dead-end street in Lakeview, recalled the other day. “The whole thing mushroomed into a case of trying to desegregate.”

As the protest gained momentum, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People filed a suit in September, 1962, in the name of Mr. Mitchell's 10-year-old daughter, Patricia Ann, charging that there was racial imbalance.

In June of the following year, Commissioner Allen ordered balancing, an order that was aimed at the district but swept across the state.

A special commission created by Dr. Allen to study the problem reported that there was no evidence of deliberate segregation in the district, but that de facto distribution had the effect of continuing a “ghetto-type situation.” The community polarized. The suit and countersuits rose through the courts until October, 1965, when the United States Supreme Court refused to consider a petition to reverse Dr. Allen's order.

Makeshift schools were organized by residents; parents kept their children from attending classes; sit-downs, sit-ins and arrests occurred. The Princeton Plan, by which classes were reorganized by grades, ran into serious difficulties, not

the least of which was the withdrawal from the system of white pupils by the parents when the time came for them to attend classes at Woodfield Road School.

Not until five years after Dr. Allen's order did the protesters and district officials settle on a compromise arrangement centered on a 4-4-4 grade division. As Mr. Mitchell maintains:

“As I look back, I see that we bought bill of goods. The arrangement was explained that Woodfield Road School would be closed and the black students transferred to the other two schools with some portable classrooms brought over to take care of any students who could not be accommodated. The thing that was offered to us for acceptance of the closing of the school —and we had reservations—was a commitment by the state to pay the transportation costs for a (three-year) period. This appeared to be a solution with which we could live.”

Instead of the community learning to accept the entire plan, as Mr. Mitchell says the black faction had hoped, it steadfastly resisted a key element after the state ended its financing last year. All three referendums proposing allocation of district funds have been soundly defeated and black youngsters, some of whom must travel almost two miles to class each day, are taken in car pools or pay for public transportation.

Where the population in the district had broken down two-thirds white and onethird black, today, according to the local Superintendent of Schools, 34 per cent of the pupils—virtually all of them white — attend non-public schools and the racial proportion within the system hovers at the 50-50 mark.

And Mr. Mitchell himself withdrew his daughter from the system in 1964 because “then the issue was not only race, but the quality of education.”

“There generally are two purposes ascribed to these [balancing] plans,” said Representative Norman F. Lent, an outspoken critic of the program as State Senator from the district from 1962 until his election to Congress in the fall of 1970. “One is achieving integration and the other is improving the education of the youngsters.

“I don't think either of these goals was achieved. Actually, it reversed the balance, if anything.”

Sponsors Amendment

Representative Lent, who prodded the State Legislature into passing a bill prohibiting busing on the basis of race to correct imbalance (it was ruled unconstitutional last May), is currently proposing a controversial constitutional amendment that, he says, is similar and “seems to be the only recourse the people have” to fight forced busing.

“The Malvern, ruling,” he concluded, “rather than being as far-reaching as it seemed at the time, has almost been dwarfed into insignificance by the Richmond, Va., decision earlier this year which consolidated three counties—like taking Brooklyn, Queens and Nassau — and erased all school district lines in ordering school authorities to achieve a racial balance throughout the system.”

Lincoln Lynch, at the time of the state order the chairman of the Long Island Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality, has changed his views too from those he held when, he said, he “participated in every demonstration.”

“Looking back on the issue,” said Mr. Lynch who currently is a member of the board of directors of the Urban Coalition, “the matter never was resolved. I think now that we made a very great mistake in forcing the closure of the Woodfield

Road School. We should have worked to get the type of curriculum that would have made the black children not feel that In order to get a good education, they have to be sitting next to a white student in a white school.”

Another key figure in the controversy, Dr. Bayard J. DeNoie, was elected president of the Malverne Board of Education only weeks after the Allen edict and served until 1965 when he returned to private life and his dental practice.

“One of the things that Charles W. Reardon, vice president of the Board of Education in Malverne. was lost over the years,” he recalled last week, “was the fact that while the Malverne case was lost re: busing, it actually was not properly engaged. The wrong issue went to the courts.

“The issue that really was taken to the Supreme Court involved whether the Commissioner had the power to do what he did here. It never fully debated whether there was a good thing involved in integrating the schools along the Princeton Plan as Allen ordered.

“I felt, and I still feel, that this was the wrong approach. You might now call me one of the first black power advocates, although I wouldn't have accepted it at the time. What is interesting to me now is that in contrast to my period, when we had to deal with the violence generated by the parents, we have subsequently had to contend with the violence of the students.”

Arrests of demonstrators in 1962 and 1963 drew national attention because prior protest activities in the district and elsewhere had rarely resulted in such drastic official action.

In the last several years, racial incidents have erupted among the 1,000 students at Malverne High School, the only high school in the district. At one point, Nassau County detectives were stationed in the building and last March, school

was closed after fights between blacks and whites broke out.

To Dr. James Carnrite, Superintendent of Schools since 1967, the racial conflicts of the last three years not only have had nothing to do with the earlier controversy, but are “very normal and typical of a school system where you have black youngsters and white youngsters.”

“It is very distressing and disturbing, and people certainly despair over the fact,” he said, “but there again you return to the central question: How can we improve the instructional program so these things will not take place? The balancing, that is the opening and the closing of the schools, were mechanical things.”

According to Dr. Carnrite, the system is continually improving both its teaching methods and its staff. Yet, while reading scores have improved substantially since the district instituted a new program two years ago, math scores have dropped.

The Superintendent says the decrease only “reflects the situation over all as far as the State of New York is concerned.” Others cited the increase in the ratio of black to white students.

To one member of the school board, Ewell Finley, a black, busing never was the issue at all, nor is it the issue today in the district or elsewhere in the country. No pupils here are required to commute farther than the legal limit allowable by law, he stressed.

He added, “The fact of the matter is that no matter what is said about the events in the district, each child now has an equal opportunity at a good education. That's what really counts, not whether black kids have to go a distance into white neighborhoods.”

Just why district residents have three times turned down proposals for financing busing and upkeep of portable classrooms would seem to be easily answerable, if one were to believe that only white taxpayers voted against the plans.

But Charles W. Reardon, who now is vice president of the Board of Education and served as head of the Taxpayers and Parents Association formed to head off the eventual balancing edict, said he believed some black residents had helped vote the referendums down as well. "Look at it this way," he said.

"Transportation costs money and each and every homeowner would feel the burden of paying it, regardless if they had children in the system or not. I think black families without children in our system probably voted against it."

Was the entire effort to seek balancing worthwhile in the first place? Burbank Mitchell, whose daughter's name headed the original come-plaint, now is convinced it was a "learning experience at best."

"I wouldn't do it again, not at all in the way we did it," he said.

"We lost. We won the battle but lost the war. If we had spent the effort in upgrading the education in the black school instead of pressing for integration, then integration would have come as a natural course of events. But it's impossible to integrate before you achieve equality. And that means true equality, in the minds of the people you're dealing with."