It's Complicated

Desegregation and Belonging in the Boston Public Schools

Podcast Episode Scripts

by
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A Senior Project Submitted to the Department of Education
Vassar College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
April 2025

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Podcaster's Note

This document contains five podcast scripts that I used to record my podcast. There are a number of things to note.

All of the italics are my own, and I use them to help me know what to emphasize when I read the scripts out loud while recording.

Any discrepancies between the script and the audio are changes that I made in the moment while recording, usually in an attempt to come across as more conversational. There are not any significant differences.

I used footnotes for my in-text citations, which is unconventional for the APA format, however using footnotes make it easier for me to read the script out loud while recording.

Lastly, in addition to the audio files I turned into the Department of Education, all five podcast episodes are available to listen to on Spotify, free of charge.

Episode One: Getting to Know the Boston Public Schools

Have you ever wondered what goes into enrolling children in an urban public school district? In the city of Boston, it's probably more complicated than you thought.

Welcome to *It's Complicated*! My name is Edie Pike and I'm a senior college student exploring the Boston Public Schools, its history of desegregation efforts and its current school selection model. In this episode of *It's Complicated*, I will provide a lay of the land and dive into what has already been researched and written about topics related to mine, such as Boston Public Schools history, the role of parents and families in schools, and school choice. I will also provide a theoretical framework that I utilize throughout the upcoming episodes. Lastly, I will finish with a roadmap for what's to come.

I. Introduction

The Boston Public Schools are known for having a complicated school selection process that involves the ranking of schools and a lottery, all while the city has to juggle the needs of thousands of families with a seemingly infinite number of different needs. The school selection model that the Boston Public Schools, or BPS, currently uses is a product of many previous versions of solutions that were aimed at desegregating, integrating, and increasing equity in Boston's schools. Boston is still a segregated city, which is a result of the city's urban development as well as immigration and residential patterns. In 1954, the monumental case *Brown v. The Board of Education* prohibited racial segregation in United States public schools, but Boston's schools are also extremely racially imbalanced because of residential patterns and things like white flight to the suburbs and to private schools. This racial imbalance leads to severe inequity across the district as well as the wider Boston metropolitan area.

Since *Brown v. Board*, the BPS has used a number of solutions to address desegregation and integration. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were a few busing initiatives, including private programs organized by BPS parents, and the infamous mandated busing ordered by the district. The school selection model that the district uses today is a version of open enrollment school choice involving a ranking process and a lottery, with the goal of giving families some level of choice in where their children attend school. Each solution has pros and cons, but while they all aimed to achieve desegregation, integration, and equity, they fell short of addressing a top priority of students and families: a sense of belonging and community.

It seems like there is a desire in Boston to develop a sustainable and equitable school enrollment and assignment process, but I'm really curious to understand, *what is the relationship between past and present solutions to desegregation in the Boston Public Schools and what gets lost in the search for desegregation, integration, and equity?* Those against mandated busing believed

that the school district should not tell families what to do by forcing them to send their children by bus to schools across the city, which explains the shift to school choice because it allowed the district to put the choice in parents' hands. Busing may have achieved more racial balance, but it definitely did not achieve equity, since there was so much hostility between the racial groups involved in mandated busing. School choice was developed as a way to desegregate schools and decrease inequities in schools, but because it puts the responsibility on parents to choose, it forces families to 'figure it out themselves' or to 'navigate the system.' I have found that this actually contributes to further inequity because families are going to have different abilities to 'navigate.'

The transition towards school choice represents a larger cultural move away from bureaucratic control towards individual choice, but examining each of these desegregation solutions reveals a lot of interesting dynamics about what parents and families really want out of their public school systems. I certainly believe in the desegregation and integration of public schools, but I know that the many solutions utilized in Boston have both successes and failures. I want to look at the imperfections of these solutions and understand what families value and the positives that they manage to find in imperfect systems. This is a really complex issue, one that deals with history, parent and family involvement, and educational policy, and my exploration of this topic has allowed me to understand that these solutions to desegregation and inequity fail to address something that families are truly in search of in the education for their children: a sense of belonging and community.

II. Literature Review

As I set out to explore the relationship between past and present solutions to desegregation in the Boston Public Schools and what gets lost in the search for desegregation, integration, and equity, we need to understand Boston's racial history and school desegregation efforts, the role of parent involvement in schools, debates of school choice, and the current landscape of the Boston Public Schools. This podcast is part of a conversation of the desegregation of public education, parent and family values in education, and the tensions of school choice, so let's jump into what folks have already been writing and studying about these topics.

A. Boston's History of Race and Class Segregation

Starting with Boston's history of race and class segregation, we must acknowledge the extensive history of segregation throughout the city of Boston and in its public schools. To understand the current landscape of the Boston Public Schools, I will go through a brief history of immigration, demographics, and neighborhoods. The racial demographic and racial dynamics in Boston are largely a result of the history of immigration to Boston and the neighborhoods that different groups of immigrants settled in. One of the most influential immigrant groups to Boston's racial

dynamics are the Irish Catholics, who largely arrived to Boston between 1732-1840.[1] Another large demographic shift in Boston resulted from the Great Migration that drove many Black Americans to northern cities, including Boston.[2]

The city of Boston is actually much bigger than the historic downtown area, and certain neighborhoods became enclaves for the many groups of immigrants arriving to the city. Boston's Black residents mostly lived in the West End neighborhood until 1895, before they were displaced by a new wave of European immigrants, and instead settled in the lower South End.[3] As the population of Black Boston residents grew, the community began extending farther and farther south, inhabiting lower Roxbury by the 1930s and eventually the neighborhoods of Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and Hyde Park.[4] Because the Black community kept growing, Black residents began to encroach into historically all white neighborhoods, which was strongly resisted by the existing white residents.[5]

The struggle for desegregation really came to a head in the 1960s and 1970s with the Boston Busing Crisis. It's called a 'crisis' because it was an ongoing, tense, and even violent struggle for school desegregation in the city of Boston that involved the busing of students to schools far from their homes in order to integrate the schools. The Busing Crisis spanned many years, but what really sparked it was the case *Morgan v. Hennigan* from 1972 to 1974. The original complaint that initiated the case was filed by Black parents of the NAACP against Boston's School Committee in 1972.[6] The plaintiffs were the same group of Black parents, and they claimed that the School Committee was maintaining school segregation intentionally.[7]

Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. sided with the parents and agreed that the school committee had been upholding racial segregation in the BPS, and he prohibited the school committee from discriminating on the basis of race and from maintaining segregation in the district.[8] The court's decision resulted in forced busing, which caused heightened hostility between Boston's poor white and Black residents and racial riots across the city. This legal battle represents an issue larger than education itself, but the impacts that the Busing Crisis had on the BPS and its students were very apparent. School desegregation cases like *Brown v. Board* and *Morgan v. Hennigan* revealed conversations about school integration and the pressing issue of equitable education for all students, regardless of background.

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[1] Johnson, 2015.
[2] O'Connor, 2001.
[3] O'Connor, 2001.
[4] O'Connor, 2001.
[5] O'Connor, 2001.
[6] Delmont and Theoharis, 2017.
[7] Morgan v. Hennigan, 1974.
[8] Morgan v. Hennigan, 1974.

B. The Role of Parents and Families in Schools

The next topic I want to talk about is the role of parents and families in schools. Parents and families are always involved in schools and the educational system because they are the primary caretakers and decision makers. They understandably want the best for their children, and many are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve it. Numerous scholars examine this inherent role of parents in public schools, and the positive and negative effects that their choices have on the education of their children, and on education systems in general.

There's a study from 2013 by Shelley McDonough Kimelberg and Chase M. Billingham where they demonstrate how Boston parents' preferences for their childrens' education affects their school choice decisions. They focus on urban middle-class parents, and they find that the specific parents in their sample all value racial diversity in their school environments, which influences their decision to stay in the Boston Public Schools rather than moving to the predominantly white suburbs for schools.[9] They also find that two dominant factors that influence parents' school choice decisions are an attachment to the notion of a neighborhood school and the reliance on other similar parents to make similar school choices.[10] They worry that when wealthy families select schools with families with similar backgrounds, they create 'clusters' of the already small population of wealthy families in the BPS, which creates a bit of segregation.[11]

I also want to talk about the podcast that inspired my interest in making this podcast, it's called *Nice White Parents*, and it was produced by Chana Joffe-Walt and the New York Times in 2020. *Nice White Parents* is also concerned with wealthy families in urban public school districts and the ways in which their choices can impact a school district. In *Nice White Parents*, Joffe-Walt looks at a Brooklyn public school district and has a similar focus on the value in racial diversity that wealthy families have. However, the podcast primarily focuses on the different initiatives that groups of wealthy white parents began in their school district to increase the quality of education. The problem with these initiatives is that the parents were really acting on their own desires and values rather than the actual needs of the community. Race is really central to this podcast because Joffe-Walt finds that white parents are more likely than non-white parents to make change and initiate it in the first place.[12]

There's some overlap between *Nice White Parents* and this podcast because we both look at how public school districts and families respond to desegregation initiatives. I'm also interested in how these responses are unique to certain communities and demographics, and how this contributes to inequity. However, my research in Boston revealed that inequities exist across many groups beyond race, like socioeconomic class, and immigration status, and in my podcast,

[9] Kimelberg and Billingham, 2013.
[10] Kimelberg and Billingham, 2013.
[11] Kimelberg and Billingham, 2013
[12] Joffe-Walt, 2020.

I'm interested in exploring where and how these inequities emerge in the BPS's responses and solutions to school desegregation.

The study by Kimelberg and Billingham and *Nice White Parents* both focus on middle and upper class parents that are mostly white. Kimelberg and Billingham make a crucial point that middle and upper class parents make up the minority of BPS parents. While privileged parents do exist in the BPS, my podcast doesn't look at their influence the same way that Kimelberg & Billingham and Joffe-Walt do. Their work is still helpful though because it explores parent decision making, what they care about in their children's education, and what they will or will not do to seek the best possible outcome for their children. It would be unfair of me to disregard privileged populations, because even though there are few of them in the BPS, they still contribute to inequity in desegregation solutions, by concentrating at certain schools or by opting out of public schools altogether.

C. School Choice

The next thing I want to talk about is school choice. School choice is another school desegregation solution that emerged after the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954. School choice is a broad concept, but it generally refers to educational options that are alternatives to typical public school districting and enrollment, and is often seen as a form of educational reform.[13] There are a lot of different forms of school choice programs, like private, magnet, and charter schools, home schooling, and open enrollment policies. There are a couple of other school choice programs that give families money to spend on school tuition, but this podcast is only focused on the school selection model that Boston uses within its public schools.[14]

These alternative school options aimed to desegregate because it gave families *choice*, relying on the assumption that if all families can choose to send their children anywhere, then families unhappy with their assigned schools could simply go somewhere else. The problem with this logic though is that schools are drastically different in quality, and families would just opt into the high quality schools and leave the poor quality schools behind. This often meant that urban schools, particularly schools that served communities of color, were left behind in favor of better schools, often private or in the suburbs. School choice is considered a bit of a conservative solution because it aligns with things like free market economics and decreased government involvement.[15] I found that most of the research on school choice proves this to be true, but I am still curious to explore how school choice strategies are used in the BPS, and what successes and failures the district has experienced with school choice.

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[13] Garcia, 2018.
[14] Garcia, 2018.
[15] Garcia, 2018.

Boston has used a couple of variations of school choice to address desegregation. The mandated busing that was ordered as a result of *Morgan v. Hennigan* was the first major desegregation attempt in the BPS. Once it became clear that mandated busing wasn't working, the city started to use school choice strategies in hopes that they would desegregate schools more effectively than busing.[16] The first version of school choice in 1984 allowed families in a specific part of the city to rank schools within a certain distance from their house, giving them a choice for the first time, rather than a single assignment. This model expanded to the whole city in 1989, which resulted in the creation of three 'zones' across the entire city, where families could only rank schools in their zone.[17] Today, the BPS still relies on these school choice models, using a more developed, home-based lottery algorithm that still involves ranking schools.[18]

There is a lot of debate around school choice, and a lot of people criticize how it perpetuates inequity in public education. Supporters of school choice argue that school choice returns local control to parents and families and away from government bureaucracies.[19] But, there are a lot of scholars that have pointed out the flaws of school choice. One of the main critiques of school choice is whether or not parent and family values lead families under school choice models to segregate schools by values. David Garcia argues that when school choice is unregulated, families with similar values will concentrate in schools that align with those values, which will segregate schools.[20] On the other hand, a study by Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall claimed that segregation is created by external factors, like residential patterns, and that parental values and preferences don't have much influence on existing segregation.[21] I have trouble with this argument, and though Boston's school choice is not unregulated, I have found that parent values still play a role in school selection and even lead to the concentration of homogenous communities in schools.

School choice also has a lot of limitations, as Chistopher Saldaña and Huriya Jabbar explore in an interview for the National Education Policy Center podcast. The examples they discuss include the complications of the application process, the issue of transportation to schools that may be far away, and even the stress of choosing, and being overwhelmed by the amount of choice. They find that these limitations contribute to inequity in school choice.[22] Authors Kenneth R. Godwin and Frank R. Kemerer also find that there is a large difference in the access that parents and families have to information on school choice. Wealthier parents and families tend to participate in school choice programs because they have more access to information about school choice programs and are better able to make choice schools work for their families

[16] Larkin, 2024.
[17] Larkin, 2024.
[18] Larkin, 2024.
[19] Garcia, 2018.
[20] Garcia, 2018.
[21] Schneider et al., 2000.
[22] From the interview with Jabbar.

with regard to things like transportation.[23] I found that a lot of these limitations exist in the current BPS school selection model because it's a complex process that involves time and effort to navigate.

III. Theoretical Framework

In addition to reviewing what has been written and reported about the BPS, I want to establish a theoretical framework to help you understand how I'm thinking about issues of desegregation and belonging in Boston. In this theoretical framework, I'm going to take you through some theories of social and cultural capital and belonging that inform my research. I'll also talk briefly about my own positionality and how it affects the way I approach this work.

A. Social and Cultural Capital

Social and cultural capital are two theories that have been developed over time by many scholars of sociology. Some of the founding scholars are Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, but I've found work by Alejandro Portes, Paul Adler and Seok-Woo Kwon that provide very helpful overviews of the concepts. Social and cultural capital both refer to an intangible asset that can be invested in, in exchange for future benefits, but cultural capital has more to do with the individual and how someone can uplift themselves by investing in the development of skills, whereas social capital is investment through joining social networks.[24]

The main features of social capital are extra-familial social networks, bounded solidarity, and knowledge. Let's start with extra-familial social networks. These are networks that exist outside of the family, like groups of friends, colleagues, school communities, any group of people that are connected to each other through a shared institution or space. This concept is central to understanding the theory of social capital, because membership in networks is how people build social capital and access its benefits.[25] These networks do not exist on their own, they are constantly constructed and maintained by different forms of investment in the network.[26] In urban school districts, social networks exist in a bunch of ways, from school communities to groups of families and friends, and even colleagues. People constantly tap into these networks when navigating the school selection process in order to understand the model and decide where to send their children to school.

The next important feature of social capital is bounded solidarity, which comes from Karl Marx's concept of class consciousness, when workers became a social class by identifying with their collective situation. In a similar vein, bounded solidarity refers to the sense of community that

[23] Godwin & Kemerer, 2002.
[24] Coleman, 1988. Portes, 1998.
[25] Coleman, 1988.
[26] Portes, 1998.

comes out of social networks, especially those in disadvantaged positions, that causes members to relate to each other.[27] For example, recent immigrants in Boston find a strong community with others from the same country or language, and rely on those connections to navigate the school selection process.

The last main feature I'll talk about is the benefit of the knowledge and information accessed through membership in a social network. Knowledge and information that is specific to a social network becomes a valuable asset because it's usually only known by members of the network.[28] Gaining access to this knowledge is valuable, because it allows those who possess it to make decisions, connections, and opportunities based on the knowledge they gained. When it comes to the BPS school selection model, knowledge plays a large role in navigating the process, as the process is incredibly complex and confusing. Knowledge and information is a vital part of navigating the school selection process, but it is often hard to find and there is a lack of outreach to families about the process.

I also want to talk about the inequities that come out of social capital, and how social capital itself perpetuates these inequities. First of all, social networks are exclusive because the only people who are able to access the network's information and knowledge are those who are in it.[29] But not everyone is able to join the same networks, there are a lot of barriers that get in the way of joining networks. Networks are usually formed around commonalities, in job, race and ethnicity, language, things like that. This creates a sort of a domino effect: individual differences affect which social networks you can join, and the social networks you join affect how many benefits you receive.[30] This is where inequity comes into play, because people who are able to join more social networks are able to gain more benefits themselves and prevent others from receiving the same benefits.[31] In the case of Boston's school selection model, inequities across socioeconomic status, language, work schedule, and access to transportation means that some families are better equipped to navigate the process than others.

B. Belonging

The next element to my theoretical framework is the concept of belonging. Belonging and social capital are very related because a sense of community and belonging play a large role in the formation of social networks. The concept and theories of belonging have been theorized by a number of disciplines, including psychology and sociology. From a psychological lens, the concept of belonging relates back to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs that identify the human need for love, affection, and belongingness.[32] In sociology, concepts of belonging can be

[27] Portes, 1998.
[28] Coleman, 1988.
[29] Portes, 1998, 21.
[30] Coleman, 1988.
[31] Adler and Kwon, 2002.
[32] Slaten et al., 2016. Maslow, 1943.

traced back to Émile Durkheim's theories of solidarity and Karl Marx's theories of alienation.[33] Belonging is important to this podcast because a lot of my findings illustrate how experiences with various school desegregation models in Boston are shaped by the search for belonging or a lack of belonging in schools.

A very basic understanding of belonging is the feeling of inclusion, acceptance, and comfort. It's important to understand that belonging is a dynamic process and negotiation rather than a static state of being.[34] Belonging also relies on consistent, positive, and strong relationships with people that are seen regularly.[35] Furthermore, there are two sides to belonging, one that claims belonging and one that grants belonging.[36] In the context of my podcast, students and families would be 'claiming belonging' from their schools and the desegregation solutions would be 'granting belonging.'

The formation of social groups is crucial to the concept of belonging because we gravitate to spaces where we find belonging, which typically have 'imaginary boundaries' that define requirements for group belonging, like descent, race, culture, religion, and langage.[37] This often results in an 'us versus them' mindset that creates inclusion and exclusion between groups.[38] In schools, examples of belonging are feelings of connection and attachment to peers and the school itself, as well as a general sense of community and feeling welcomed and included.[39] As mentioned before, belonging is reliant on relationships, but in schools, it is also reliant on a school environment that is conducive to belonging.[40] If students lack belonging at school, their academic performance, sense of self, and overall educational experience are negatively impacted.[41]

There is a lot written about belonging in schools, with a particular focus on students deemed 'at-risk' and how they struggle to find belonging. I don't like using the term 'at-risk' because it assumes a deficit-based mindset, but it *is* true that some students have a more difficult time finding belonging than others, especially students who lack stability and belonging outside of school.[42] It is no coincidence that these students are disproportionately non-white and lower class. As a district primarily made up of economically disadvantaged students of color, the experiences explored in this podcast reflect these dynamics of belonging and what happens when it is not achieved.

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[33] Yuval-Davis, 2006.
[34] Antonsich, 2010. Yuval-Davis, 2006.
[35] Antonsich, 2010.
[36] Antonsich, 2010.
[37] Yuval-Davis, 2006.
[38] Yuval-Davis, 2006.
[39] Slaten et al., 2016.
[40] Slaten et al., 2016.
[41] Beck & Malley, 1998.
[42] Beck & Malley, 1998.

C. Personal Positionality

The last part of this framework is my own personality. I was originally inspired by Chana Joffe-Walt's *Nice White Parents,* which has sort of become my muse for this entire project. I first listened to it in 2020, and it was one of the first times I learned about issues of educational inequity and the dynamics between parents of different races, classes, and immigration statuses. I grew up in a predominantly white and wealthy Boston area suburb, and *Nice White Parents* really opened my eyes to how these dynamics were unfolding in my school district. I attended public schools in my town from K-12, and the school district is highly regarded across the state for its quality academics, resources, and educational and extracurricular opportunities. I was made aware from a young age of the great differences between my public school district and the City of Boston's public school district, in terms of physical school buildings and the resources and opportunities we had access to.

I'm a Chinese American female adopted by white parents, and I have always been aware of this racial identity and how it affects my educational experiences. Because of my racial identity and public school experiences, I was unfamiliar with some of the complexities that emerge in managing an urban district with a different demographic and school selection model, and I really owe this curiosity and research interest to *Nice White Parents.* I'm also hoping to become a teacher in the BPS, which has further motivated my interest in researching BPS history, the current school selection model, and unpacking the dynamics at play between families and the district, and how this affects the educational experiences of BPS students.

IV. Roadmap and Conclusion

So now that we have established some background on the Boston Public Schools and school choice and acknowledged the framework I will be using as I work through this topic, what's next?

Let's recall the question that this podcast sets out to answer. *What is the relationship between past and present solutions to desegregation in the Boston Public Schools and what gets lost in the search for desegregation, integration, and equity?* In order to explore this complex and ever so relevant question, I will first take you through a more detailed history of the busing initiatives that Boston has used, like mandated busing, Operation Exodus, and METCO. Then I will move towards a discussion of the current way school selection is structured in the BPS and how it is affected by the district's history, and how current parents and administrators make sense of it. After that, I'll chat about this idea of finding a sense of community and belonging in schools and what that looks like in these different desegregation models. To wrap up, I will share some final thoughts and offer some suggestions for where the city should go from here.

Thank you for tuning in, and I'll see you next time on *It's Complicated*!

Episode Two: The Boston Busing Crisis

You may have heard of the Boston Busing Crisis, but what was it really? What and who was behind it? And what lasting impacts did it have on the city and the schools?

Welcome back to *It's Complicated*! This episode will be all things busing. Busing is a bit of a buzzword in the BPS, due to the tumultuous history of the Boston Busing Crisis. The crisis itself escalated at a particular moment, but tensions had been on the rise in Boston for a long time. In order to understand where the Boston Public Schools are at today, it is important to know the history of the district and the ways the district reacts and responds to its past. This episode goes through the court case that resulted in the infamous busing mandate, the historical race and class relations involved, and the arguments behind the antibusing movement.

I. Introduction

Busing was a well known strategy that Boston used to desegregate its public schools and was famously mandated by the district between 1974-1988. It got its title of the 'Boston Busing Crisis' because mandated busing exacerbated the existing race and class tension between Boston's working class white and Black residents that escalated to riots and violence in the 1970s as a direct result of the busing order. This was what the crisis refers to and it's the reason why busing at this level was not a realistic desegregation solution.

II. The Boston Busing Crisis and Mandated Busing, 1974

First, I'm gonna go through some background behind the Boston Busing Crisis and the mandated busing order. Boston is made up of a lot of neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods most associated with the Busing Crisis are South Boston, Dorchester, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, the South End, Hyde Park, Mattapan, East Boston, and Charlestown.[43] At the time of the Busing Crisis, these neighborhoods were very segregated by race, and all were considered lower socioeconomic class. This segregation was a result of immigration to the city, as many immigrant groups chose to settle together in concentrated areas. Over time, Boston's Black residents were pushed out of the historically Black neighborhoods by practices like redlining, and this led to the creation of new Black enclaves in the southern Boston neighborhoods of Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester.[44]

Before the Boston Busing Crisis came to a head in the 1970s, Massachusetts passed the Racial Imbalance Act of 1965 that prohibited school segregation in Massachusetts public schools. Importantly, the act defined the percentages of white students and non-white students that

[43] Formisano, 1991.
[44] Miletsky, 2022.

constitute a racial imbalance and are not permitted.[45] Racial imbalance, according to the act, is when more than 50% of a school's students are non-white[46] The act also defines racial balance when 30-50% of a school's students are non-white, and racial isolation when 30% or less students are non-white.[47] After the act was passed, all public school committees in Massachusetts were required to report racial statistics to the State Board of Education.[48]

The Busing Crisis started because of a legal case, *Morgan v. Hennigan* in 1972-74, where the plaintiffs argued that the Boston School Committee was upholding segregation in the BPS. This was started by a group of Black parents of the NAACP who filed the original complaint against the Boston School Committee in 1972. Tallulah Morgan was one of fifteen plaintiffs, and all were Black families with children in the BPS. James Hennigan was the chair of the school committee, but the defendants also included the school committee as a whole, the BPS superintendent, William Ohrenberger, and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.[49] The complaint filed by the plaintiffs in *Morgan* includes data from the 1971-72 academic year: 32% of Boston's total enrollment that year were Black, 48 out of 197 total schools had 70% or more Black students, and 119 out of 197 total schools had 70% or more white students.[50]

The judge who decided this case was Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr., and he sided with the plaintiffs, finding that they had undoubtedly proved that the school committee had been violating the Racial Imbalance Act and upholding racial segregation in the BPS.[51] As part of this decision, Judge Garrity ordered mandated busing, which meant that between 17,000 and 18,000 of BPS students would be bused to schools they didn't live near, with the goal of achieving more racial balance.[52] This was supposed to be a temporary solution for the 1974-75 school year, and the school committee was ordered to come up with a long term desegregation plan by December 1974, that would be effective at the start of the following school year.[53]

A downside of this though was that Garrity was not really that familiar with the mandated busing plan, because it had actually been designed by the Massachusetts State Board of Education.[54] Because of this disconnect, mandated busing had many shortcomings. One example was the pairing of the neighborhoods of South Boston and Roxbury, meaning that high school students from each neighborhood would be bused to the opposite neighborhood's high school.

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[45] Racial Imbalance Act, 1965.
[46] Racial Imbalance Act, 1965.
[47] Racial Imbalance Act, 1965.
[48] Morgan v. Hennigan, 1974.
[49] Morgan v. Hennigan, 1974.
[50] Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James W. Hennigan et al., 1972.
[51] Morgan v. Hennigan, 1974.
[52] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1976
[53] DeJong, 2022.
[54] Formisano, 1991.

sophomores from the mostly Black Roxbury High were bused to the mostly white South Boston High School.[55] These neighborhoods were really incompatible and both very segregated, as South Boston was mostly white and Roxbury was mostly Black. This led to an eruption of racial violence towards Black students that ended up making national headlines. There was anti-Black discrimination in schools, antibusing marches, rallies, and protests at schools and across the city, racist grafitti, and even rocks and bottles were thrown at buses transporting Black students.[56] These race riots were really what characterized the Boston Busing Crisis and turned enough heads that made it clear that busing would not be a practical solution to desegregation.

A. Race and Class Relations

I want to talk a bit about the race and class relations that were central to the Busing Crisis. Obviously, race is really central to school desegregation, but I want to note that in the Boston Busing Crisis, socioeconomic class is incredibly relevant as well. The relationship between race and class groups were at the heart of the Busing Crisis, and arguably Boston's history as well. Race, class, and ethnicity are entangled and have been throughout American history, and it's actually really important to acknowledge how they intersect in order to achieve desegregation.[57] This is an argument that Ronald Formisano makes in his book *Boston Against Busing*. I actually didn't find many books about the Busing Crisis, so *Boston Against Busing* was a really important source for my understanding of the Busing Crisis.

In Boston, the working class white population was largely made up of Irish Americans, who have played an integral role in the development of Boston's modern culture. When Irish Americans first arrived in Boston and as their population grew, they were actually discriminated against for being Irish.[58] This changed drastically however, and by the 1920s, Boston had its first Irish American mayor, Irish Americans had more political control in the city, and Boston's culture started reflecting the Irish community's values.[59]

A few years later in the 1960s, Boston's racial demographic began to shift as more Black folks were immigrating to the city. This brought in a lot of change, both social and cultural, and many Irish Americans felt threatened by this change. They noticed that Black people were gaining attention and rights, and felt like they were losing their own rights and power. This dynamic caused a huge divide between the steadfast Irish American population and the rapidly growing Black population. This was a common phenomenon actually, and urban scholar Howell Baum talks about how white working class populations were pitted against Black working class populations, and often seen a scapegoat; constantly being blamed by the Black community and

[55] Formisano, 1991.
[56] Formisano, 1991.
[57] Formisano, 1991.
[58] Miletsky, 2022.
[59] Miletsky, 2022.

wealthier white populations for being racist.[60] In Boston, this really fueled the anger of the white working class and the conflict between the white and Black communities over the course of the Boston Busing Crisis.

B. The Antibusing Movement and the Boston School Committee

Now I'm gonna get into the antibusing movement and where they were coming from. Members of the antibusing movement opposed Judge Garrity's order for mandated busing, and this came from an anger of being told what to do by the district, but their actions also brought anti-Black racism to the forefront. Fear also played a big role in the antibusing movement, and many antibusers expressed fears about crime and violence in the Black neighborhoods their children would attend school in.[61] This fear was shaped by both prejudiced views of Black neighborhoods *and* the reality of reported instances of crime and violence.[62] Regardless of racist beliefs, there were also very real fears of losing the neighborhood community, fears of change, and fears of sending children to dangerous parts of the city for school. Ultimately, antibusers were defending their communities and their values, that were very grounded in race in class pride and a sense of belonging. This demonstrates that longing for sense of community and belonging emerges amongst antibusers, even though many of their actions were [violent and racist]

Other important antibusing figures were Louise Day Hicks of South Boston and her antibusing organization, Restore Our Alienated Rights (ROAR), as well as the Boston School Committee. Louise Hicks was a Boston parent and was very outspoken against integration and antibusing, so much so that she became the face of the antibusing movement. Hicks and many members of the Boston School Committee believed that segregation did not exist in the BPS. The school committee of the 60s and 70s was notoriously resistant to desegregation and integration efforts.[63] Hicks joined the school committee in 1961 and served as chairwoman from 1963-1965, and her supporters were generally Boston residents who felt that their lives and what they were familiar with was being threatened, and were worried about the effects that integration would have on their neighborhoods' sense of community.

The working class white population was the backbone of the antibusing movement. According to Formisano, this came from a fear of Black people and their neighborhoods as well as a sense of powerlessness, that I mentioned before. Mandated busing gave the working class white community a reason to act on these fears and emotions, which led to increased hostility and violence towards the Black community. Boston's residential segregation and the deep rooted history of the Irish American community in Boston created networks that were "clannish," according to Formisano. It was this deep community connection and passion that contributed to the antibusing movement's ability to organize against busing. While their actions were

[60] Baum, 2010.
[61] Formisano, 1991.
[62] Formisano, 1991.
[63] Formisano, 1991.

inexcusable due to the overt anti-Black racism, it's clear that they had a very strong network and were desperate to hold onto the sense of community they were used to.

The Boston Busing Crisis is a particularly interesting case because of its unique combination of the inequality between Black and white schools, the school committee's denial of segregation, and the political wedge driven between Boston's working class Black and white residents. Also, both Black and white families were not ready to give up their comfort and community. The communities were incompatible with each other and obviously did not find belonging at the schools they were bused to, and although they were segregated, they *did* find belonging in their neighborhood schools. Mandated busing got in the way of this sense of community that they had at their neighborhood schools and forced students into unfamiliar and hostile school environments where they were never going to find belonging.

The Boston Busing Crisis proved that there was a need for structural and cultural change, one that would be much bigger than the schools. The existing conflict between race and class groups in Boston was constructed by external factors of history, racism, and classism. A maneuver like mandated busing was never going to work; the communities were simply not ready to let go of their sense of belonging or welcome others into their communities.

III. Conclusion

So we just went through the Boston Busing Crisis and the many dynamics involved in it. Obviously it was not a good solution for the city due to the race riots that came out of it. But what I also want to emphasize here is that even though mandated busing had the goal of desegregating, it made students feel extremely isolated and 'othered' in school environments that weren't the most welcoming to them. This demonstrates a clash between desegregation and belonging and makes it seem like two are mutually exclusive: one solution can solve only desegregation or belonging, not both. This tension is something I'm going to be exploring a lot in the upcoming episodes.

Before we wrap up, I do want to emphasize that based on narratives of the Busing Crisis it's really easy to believe that all Irish working class white people felt the same about busing, and the same goes for Boston's Black community. This is not at all the intention of my podcast, and it's important to realize that antibusing often is conflated with racism, but in reality, it would be wrong to assume that all antibusers were racist, working class, or white. In reality, no one was really in favor of busing, and the priorities behind busing were really preserving their communities and seeking the best quality of education for their children.

In the next episode, I'll take you through two other busing initiatives that were used in the BPS, Operation Exodus and METCO. These were both voluntary and individually organized, but have a lot of similarities to mandated busing, especially when it comes to belonging.

Thank you for tuning in, and I'll see you next time on *It's Complicated*!

Episode Three: Voluntary Busing Initiatives

What were the other busing initiatives that were used in the Boston Public Schools? And how did they compare to mandated busing?

Welcome to another episode of *It's Complicated*! Last time we talked about the Boston Busing Crisis and mandated busing. This episode focuses on the two other busing initiatives that existed before mandated busing: Operation Exodus and the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, better known as METCO.

I. Introduction

Both of these busing programs were voluntary, and they were founded by Black BPS parents. Operation Exodus came first, in 1965 and it bused Black children to predominantly white schools *in* the city. METCO on the other hand bused Black children and eventually children of other races as well to predominantly white public schools in a bunch of Boston suburbs. METCO was founded in 1966, and it actually is still around today. My school district was and still is a METCO partner.

II. Operation Exodus, 1965-1969

First, let's talk about Operation Exodus. Before mandatory busing was initiated, two Black Boston parents named Ellen Jackson and Betty Johnson organized and operated a busing program in 1965. It was called Operation Exodus, and it was a privately funded program that bused about 250 Black children to predominantly white schools that had open seats. The Black schools Jackson and Johnson's children went to were overcrowded, and the BPS had an open enrollment policy that made it possible for Black students to take seats at predominantly white schools, as long as they could get to school themselves.[64] Funds for the program came from money raised by Operation Exodus parents in the city and from some of the wealthier suburbs outside of the city, which represented a wider support for desegregation efforts as well as civil rights activism.[65] Operation Exodus is an impressive feat of grassroots organizing by Ellen Jackson, Betty Johnson, and their cohort of parents who were constantly underestimated, but still rose to the occasion and proved their dedication to the success of Operation Exodus and, ultimately, to a better education for their children.[66]

While Operation Exodus was definitely acknowledged as a successful program and example of parental activism, it was not met without resistance. Since it was a private initiative and had no political support from the city, it was inevitable that students would face resistance when they showed up at their new schools. Lots of schools turned away Exodus students who did not arrive

[64] Formisano, 1991.
[65] Waters, 1965.
[66] de Chantal, 2017.

at school with the proper transfer paperwork from their old schools. In more extreme instances, schools who did not want to accommodate Exodus students removed desks from classrooms and blocked off areas of their school to make it seem like they did not have empty seats, even if they did.[67]

The organizers of Operation Exodus did have some fears, and I found a 1965 Boston Globe article by Bertram Waters that was written in the midst of Operation Exodus' success that talks about the fears involved in the process. Waters writes that parents were afraid of issues with the logistics of the buses and were nervous about how their children would be treated at their new schools. They were also concerned about the drastic shift in school environment and daily routine that children would experience as a result of Operation Exodus. Despite these fears however, Waters reported that what they were most scared of was the poor quality of education their children were receiving in their segregated Black schools. This fear was enough to motivate Exodus parents to keep the program running, even though they were quite limited in terms of support and resources.[68] This is really a testament to the strength and determination of the parents behind Operation Exodus, however, their other fears still had repercussions, especially on the students.

I also found a 1973 study conducted by the sociologist James Teele, where he explored the rising tensions around busing and how busing affected Black children. His study has really mixed results, where some students reported having fine experiences and others more negative experiences. The study tested for things like the child's perception of whether or not they were liked by classmates, their reported self image, and perceptions of success and achievement, and Teele came to a number of different conclusions.[69] He talked about the relationship between academic achievement and being liked by classmates, and found that students don't do as well academically when they don't feel welcome or accepted, which is a prime example of the negatives of lacking belonging.[70]
I do think that this study is valuable, but it lacks the hindsight that present day testimonies of busing initiatives have. In an installment of a PBS American Experience Series called "Pain and Promise: Remembering the Fight for School Integration," Sheila Wise Rowe and Bill Mooney-McCoy share their experiences as children of Boston's busing era. They both acknowledge that because they were children during busing, they didn't understand the politics behind busing initiatives, and it takes reflecting on these experiences as adults to really understand how much of a toll busing took on the students involved.

Wise Rowe participated in Operation Exodus as a young child, in her reflection of her experiences, she says it was traumatizing because of experiences of overt racism from teachers

[67] de Chantal, 2017.
[68] Waters, 1965.
[69] Teele, 1973.
[70] Teele, 1973.

and classmates. According to her recollection, her old school was 100% Black and her new school was 100% white.[71] I'm not sure if these numbers were entirely true, but the difference in racial makeup was definitely drastic, due to the level of segregation in the district at the time. On the first day at her new school, Wise Rowe describes feeling like she was "being thrown off the deep end of the pool," because of the drastic difference between the comfortable and safe community of her old school and her new school where some of the people there had never interacted with a Black person before.[72] Operation Exodus is definitely admirable for its level of grassroots organizing and the dedicated parents who made it possible, but Wise Rowe's testimony illuminates the sacrifice the students made through the racism they experienced. Wise Rowe's experiences reveal the extreme level of isolation she felt, in a school environment where finding any sense of belonging was unlikely.

To her, the children of busing made a significant sacrifice for the sake of desegregation, and it was a shame because these busing initiatives didn't really actually achieve desegregation. Garrity's decision to introduce mandated busing forced Black Boston students out of the comfort and safety of their neighborhood schools into schools where they faced hostile racism and an extreme lack of belonging. So, was the desegregation achieved by these busing initiatives worth the traumatic experiences of Black students? This question illuminates a disconnect between the priorities of the district, families, and the experiences of students.

Operation Exodus was successful in growing and maintaining participants for a couple of years, but the program began to decline as it lost support and resources, and faced persistent resistance from the school committee. There was another reason for the program's decline though, and it was the establishment of another voluntary busing program in 1966 to public schools in the suburbs, called Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity.

III. Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO), 1966-present

The Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, or METCO for short, was established in 1966 by a group of Black parents in Boston. METCO is actually still in operation today, and in contrast to Operation Exodus, the program buses students of color from the city of Boston to predominantly white suburban public schools. When it first started, families chose METCO over Operation Exodus because they believed that the well renowned schools of the suburbs would provide a better education than Boston's schools.[73] Another goal of METCO was to increase racial diversity and 'desegregate' the schools of Boston's predominantly white suburbs, but Black students still make up a small percentage of METCO's partner districts, which makes it hard to say METCO has achieved this goal of suburban desegregation.[74]

[71] Wise Rowe, 2023.
[72] Wise Rowe, 2023, 3:35.
[73] Teele, 1973.
[74] Chanoux, 2011.

While METCO certainly has its benefits, it has quite a few drawbacks as well. For starters, the program takes some of the top students out of the BPS, which Formisano calls a "classic privatist solution" because it funneled only a small number of black students to higher quality schools.[75] This 'privatist solution' took away from resources that could be used to improve the supposedly 'low quality' BPS schools, and it perpetuated the notion that predominantly white schools were the only high quality schools.[76] Another criticism of METCO is that it's a one way solution because Black families were willing to bus their children to white suburban public schools, but white families were unwilling to have their children bused to non-white urban public schools. Despite these concerns, METCO is still around today, transporting students who live in Boston to schools in 32 public school districts in the greater Boston area.[77]

There is not a ton written about METCO, but I found two doctoral dissertations and one masters thesis that provided some really important information and perspectives on METCO as a desegregation solution. Laura Chanoux's paper discusses the responses to METCO, from the city and the suburbs, and Sarah Lyn and Efe Igho-Osagie Shavers highlight the voices and experiences of students who participated in METCO through interviews and surveys. All three of these authors discuss some of the positive outcomes of METCO, like better quality education which led to post-secondary opportunities like higher education and careers, learning how to navigate white spaces, and the sense that METCO expanded the participant's world by exposing them to a diverse range of experiences and opportunities that they would not have had access to had they attended BPS.[78] To my surprise, Shavers even found that her participants overall believed that the positive outcomes outweighed their negative experiences.[79] METCO certainly does provide students with access to resources that increase their cultural capital, but in order to gain a full understanding of METCO and analyze it as a desegregation solution, the negative experiences of former METCO participants are important to understand as well.

Chanoux's study revealed that METCO was isolating because students had to attend schools in towns that were physically very far from their homes.[80] Lyn talks about this issue of transportation and how it took students a long time to get to their schools from their homes in Boston, and the distance made it difficult for their families to attend school events.[81] There also weren't many alternate transportation options to the scheduled buses before and after school, so students participating in METCO were unable to participate in athletics or other after school activities.[82] Transportation took a large toll on the students in Lyn's sample, as many emphasized

[75] Formisano, 1991, pp. 231.
[76] Formisano, 1991.
[77] metcoinc.org
[78] Shavers, 2024.
[79] Shavers, 2024.
[80] Chanoux, 2011.
[81] Lyn, 2023.
[82] Lyn, 2023.

how they had to wake up early, arrive home late, and balance their school work, which made them feel like they were on a completely different schedule to their classmates.[83] This limited schedule affects belonging for METCO students because it forces them to be disconnected from their peers and their school community.

On top of being far from their homes, METCO participants reflected on how they stood out as racial minorities at their suburban schools and, at the same time, were treated differently in their home communities for being 'suburban' or 'white,' leading to a sense of isolation at school and at home.[84] At school, they felt like they had to hide part of their identity and many also reported that there was a lack of effort from their peers and people in their school community to learn about their personal experiences and home lives.[85] Lyn's research also revealed that METCO participants were largely friends with other METCO students, and found it hard to make friends with non-METCO students because their lives were just so different.

The METCO participants in Shavers' sample were very aware that there were few Black people at their schools, further contributing to their sense of isolation. Participants in both Lyn's and Shavers' samples also reported racially motivated microaggressions and macroaggressions. Many participants in Shavers' sample remember being called the N-slur and indicated that the perpetrator was often not held accountable, which left them feeling powerless[86] All of these negative experiences are instances of isolation, which illuminates the theme that METCO participants have a hard time finding belonging in the suburban schools. Shavers did report specifically on belonging, and found that 89% of participants said they felt like they did not belong at their schools. This was due to the pressure to assimilate and fit in, but never being able to actually achieve it, which goes back to this idea of the perpetual outsider.[87]

METCO did provide students with positive outcomes, even some that outweighed the negative experiences, but I still wonder: are the goals of desegregation and greater quality education of METCO enough to justify the feelings of isolation and lack of belonging that METCO participants experience? I'm not the only one asking this question, in fact participants in Lyn's study shared similar concerns, and were frustrated that so many resources go into operating METCO rather than into improving Boston's school.[88] In this way, METCO as a desegregation solution doesn't address the larger issue of improving the BPS and serves as a surface-level solution that diverts energy to transporting students out of the district and leaves them feeling isolated without a sense of belonging.

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[83] Lyn, 2023.
[84] Chanoux, 2011.
[85] Shavers, 2024.
[86] Shavers, 2024.
[87] Shavers, 2024.
[88] Lyn, 2023.

IV. Conclusion

Compared to mandated busing, the main goals of Operation Exodus and METCO were more along the lines of finding better educational opportunities, rather than desegregation. Racial mixing was still an important part of them, and it was sort of a ‘bonus’ or a natural result of the programs. Like mandated busing though, students who participated in Operation Exodus and METCO also felt isolated and ‘othered’ in their new school environments.

Parents were very committed to seeing the success of their busing programs, but they failed to recognize the lack of belonging, community, and inclusion that students faced as a result of these busing strategies.

In the next episode, I’ll take you through the current school selection model and how Boston began to use open enrollment school choice policies after they realized mandated busing wouldn’t work.

Thank you so much for listening, and I’ll see you next time on *It’s Complicated*!

Episode Four: Boston's Current School Selection Model

So, how does the Boston Public Schools school selection process even work? Unfortunately, it is far from simple.

Welcome back to *It's Complicated*! In this episode I will take you through the school selection process that the Boston Public Schools currently uses as of the spring 2025, when I'm making this. As the title of this podcast suggests, it's a bit complicated, and I'll need you to bear with me. I'll start by explaining how the model works, then I'll talk a bit about how families navigate the process.

I. Introduction

In the simplest form, the school selection model that Boston uses has families rank a selection of schools that their student is eligible for, based on the distance from home, and language and academic support needs. Once families rank schools, they get a final assignment based on a lottery algorithm. This model is sort of a combination of previous versions of school choice models and some newer features. School choice models were first introduced after mandated busing because the district realized that mandating busing was not a suitable solution. In 1989, the district began its first version of a choice-based program, called controlled choice, where the district was split into three zones and families could rank schools within their zone.[89]

This model stuck because it did increase integration for a bit and was generally well liked by BPS families, but in the 1990s and 2000s, there were a lot of demographic changes in Boston that led to racial imbalance yet again.[90] The most recent model was developed in 2013, and it allowed families to rank schools based on their quality and proximity to home.[91] Generally speaking, this is still the model that is used today, but the district is always introducing new policy in attempts to improve this model and work towards equity across the district.

To understand this model better, I conducted seven interviews with a mix of administrators and parents in the BPS. I'm going to share some of the findings from these interviews, but I've changed the names of the participants in order to maintain anonymity. I learned so much from these interviews, especially about how the school selection process works. The main themes that came out of these interviews were the complexities of navigating the model, the inequities this creates, and tensions between desegregation and the search for belonging.

II. How the Model Works

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[89] Larkin, 2024.
[90] Larkin, 2024.
[91] Larkin, 2024.

Ok, now I'm going to go through a more in-depth discussion of the school selection model. In my interview with Emily, a parent who also works in a BPS school, we spent the majority of the time walking through the entire registration process and exploring the website and online resources. This is a large part of her job, which is why I figure she spent so much time on it with me. The first thing we went through was how families begin the registration process, which starts at one of the BPS's four Welcome Centers. Welcome Centers are staffed with multilingual employees who are able to sit down with families and walk them step by step through the process. While they are great resources, Emily noted a major flaw that the Welcome Centers are only open on weekdays, and her local Welcome Center is actually open two days a week on Monday and Tuesday. So, even at the start of the process, there's an accessibility issue that leaves some families behind if they can't get to a Welcome Center during the hours they're open.

Another part of the process is an online portal. This is where families can explore each school's quality tier rating, distance from their residence, school start time, and plenty more helpful information when it comes to choosing schools.[92] The issue with this is that families with limited digital literacy, access to technology, and reading ability struggle to navigate the online portal. Kasey, a school administrator, spoke to this saying that knowing how to research and use the website is a privilege in the context of navigating the school selection model. This means knowing how to use Google, and email, and knowing who to get in touch with and how to get in touch with them, and while these are seemingly simple and mundane tasks, they're all a big part in navigating the school selection process.[93] Despite the support of the Welcome Centers, many families are unaware that enrolling their children in school involves this much effort. Also, in order to make use of the Welcome Centers and the online portal, families have to be aware that they exist in the first place, and if you don't have connections in the city, no one really tells families any of this.[94] Emily noted that this unfortunately means that a lot of families slip through the cracks.

There are two rounds of registration, and the first round is for students who are entering preschool, kindergarten, sixth grade, seventh grade, and ninth grade, because these are the starting grades of the majority of BPS schools. Right now, the BPS does not really have a standard model for the breakdown of grades. For example, the suburban district where I went school to had kindergarten to fifth grade for elementary school, sixth to eighth grade for middle school, and ninth to twelfth grade for high school, and this was the same across the entire district. This is not the case in Boston. Some elementary schools go to fifth, while some go to sixth, and some go all the way to eighth. High schools generally start in seventh grade or ninth grade. I know this is all really confusing, and I do have some good news that the BPS is currently trying to move towards a structure with two school models, one that is kindergarten through sixth grade, and one that is seventh through twelfth.

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[92] Interview with Emily.
[93] Interview with Kasey.
[94] Interview with Emily.

The second round of registration is for families with students starting in any other grade. School assignments are released March 31st for the first round and May 31st for the second round and seventh grade. Once students receive a school assignment, they get to stay at that school until they age out. There are some 'feeder' schools where students leaving one school are guaranteed a seat at a high school or upper school, but that's not the standard. If a family doesn't register their student during registration rounds, they are assigned to any school with an open seat, and they aren't guaranteed that seat the following school year. They have to wait for the next registration cycle and get their permanent seat that way. This is not really fair to families who move to Boston in the middle of the school year or those who aren't aware of the entry points for the enrollment rounds.

There are also some special admission schools that students have to apply to, and these are mostly at the middle and high school level.[95] The most notorious example of these special admission schools is Boston's exam high schools. There are three exam high schools in the BPS, Boston Latin Academy and the O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science in Roxbury, and Boston Latin School in Fenway. They all start in seventh grade and require students to take an exam and score high enough in order to be considered for admission. This issue of exam schools is a whole other can of worms, and there's a lot out there about their history and how they contribute to inequity, but that's beyond the scope of this podcast.

A. Factors Involved in Ranking Schools

When it comes to ranking schools, there are many factors that families must take into consideration, and the main factors that I noticed in my interviews were proximity, school-specific programming, and education quality. Proximity just means the location of schools and how close or far families want their children to travel to go to school. Students can only take the school bus if they live more than a mile away from the school or if they have an accommodation for door-to-door transportation. The BPS also gives older students MBTA passes to use public transportation to get to school.[96]

Schools also have different specific programs, like multilingual learner programs for students learning English, and special education programs for students on IEPs. The district is also introducing more full-inclusion programs where students regardless of their academic needs and accommodations all learn in the general classroom. The online portal accounts for these services, so if a family needs a language program, an IEP accommodation, or both, the portal will only give them schools that have those services.[97]

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[95] Interview with Nicholas.
[96] Interview with Nicholas.
[97] Interview with Emily.

Additionally, all schools in Boston are given a tier rating from 1-4, which is a composite score of the school's quality, where 1 is the best and 4 is the worst. This score is a combination of measures of student performance, family, community, and culture, teaching and learning, and leadership and collaboration.[98] The composite score is not equally divided between these four categories however, and student performance actually makes up 75% of the tier rating. This means that school quality under this model is mostly determined by how students at a given school are performing academically. Because of this, the tier rating cannot really be taken at face value, since it's one aspect of a school's overall profile. One of the school administrators I spoke to, Kasey, actually expressed frustration with this and said that the tier rating is not fair to schools, since student performance, which is decided by standardized testing, is not an accurate representation of the ability of teachers or the educational quality of the school.[99]

Once families rank their schools and the enrollment round closes, students are given their assignments on a lottery basis, however there are a couple of priorities that can bump students up, like sibling preference if a family has an older or younger sibling at a school and certain programs based on IEP or other needs.[100]

By including all of these factors in the school selection process, the district attempts to accommodate all of Boston's diverse family needs. The downside to this though is that it makes the process extremely complicated and stressful. There also winds up being a lot of tradeoffs, where families might choose schools that are far away but have better programming or are a better fit for their family. This process requires thoughtful and careful consideration, and even after families lock in their ranking of schools, they aren't even guaranteed a seat at their top school. This is another big flaw of the system because if families do not get their top choice, they are bumped to the bottom of the waitlist for the schools they ranked below.

B. The Lottery Aspect

Now I'm going to talk a little bit about the lottery aspect to the school selection model. The lottery is involved in the algorithm that actually assigns students their seats. Families lock in their rankings, and then the order that they are assigned is determined by lottery. By randomizing the assignment algorithm like this, the district hoped to increase equality, since all families have to go through the same process.

As you might have guessed, it is not quite so simple as a random lottery. Because of the different entry points and staggered deadlines for each round of registration and the difference in needs, like language programs, academic accommodations, and physical accommodations, a true lottery cannot exist. The lottery really mattered to Kate, who is one of the parents I interviewed. She said that since Boston's schools are so different in quality, families don't know if they'll get

[98] bostonpublicschools.org.
[99] Interview with Kasey.
[100] Interview with Emily.

assigned to what they consider a good school or a bad school.[101] If the schools were more equal in quality, then the lottery wouldn't matter because families would be happy at every school, but in a system where some schools are much higher quality than others there is more at stake.

Both parents that I interviewed spoke about the lottery and seemed to have a complicated relationship with it. They acknowledged that by randomizing the assignment order within each enrollment round, the lottery system *does* work in that it theoretically gives all families an equally random chance at seats at their choice schools. However, Kate felt like the lottery created this sense of winning or losing, which she did not think was fair.[102] The main issue with this, according to Kate, is that it's not easy to win. While it is randomized, if families do not get seats at their top choice schools, it becomes really hard to get into the other schools they like. In other words, once school placements are assigned, they are pretty set in stone and transferring is not an easy process. Kate was also concerned with what happens to families who 'lose' the lottery. Families who 'lose' but have the means tend to leave the district, either to private school or out of the city entirely, leaving other families who 'lose' behind with less desirable school options.

Another parent that I interviewed, Helen, expressed concerns that the randomization eliminates the idea of neighborhood school and the sense of community. The school her child attends doesn't have a strong sense of community, at least not one that she feels a part of. She felt that while the lottery attempts to mix families and students across the city, it limits the ability of families within neighborhoods and walking zones to mix with each other.[103] This concept of the neighborhood school came up a lot in my interviews, or at least a school that draws from neighborhood kids fosters a strong sense of community and belonging. This is incredibly important in schools, and came up in my interviews as something that families really tend to value. At the same time though, using a lottery system is a great way to insure equity because all families, regardless of circumstances, have theoretically equally good chances at getting seats at their top choice schools.

C. Addressing Inequity

Next I want to talk a little bit about inequity and where inequity exists in the current school selection model. The model does aim to address equity and make sure that the district *is* equitable, but my interviews revealed that they still fall short. To its credit, the school selection model *does* create some equality because all families have to go through the same entry point for enrollment, they all have to deal with the stress and complications of the process, and they all enter into the same assignment lottery. But inequity still emerges when it comes to the selection and ranking process. This is because families who are proactive and knowledgeable about the system know which schools are the 'best' schools to pick. The seats at the top tier schools fill up,

[101] Interview with Kate.
[102] Interview with Kate.
[103] Interview with Helen.

leaving families who were unaware of the urgency to enroll less options, regardless of having equal access to the registration process.

My first assumption is that the people who get the short end of the stick are families who are disadvantaged by things like race, or class, or immigration status, and I think this assumption comes from historical patterns of inequity in the United States. But a lot of the people that I interviewed seemed to want to push back against this assumption, and didn't really name race and class when talking about inequity; instead it was all about this idea of 'navigating' the system.

There were a couple mentions of race and the 'privileged class' of white upper class families in my interviews. For example, Luke, who is a district administrator that I interviewed, noted that the parents that come to him with complaints are mostly white women who are familiar with getting involved at school.[104] Importantly though, in my interview with another school administrator, Nicholas, it was emphasized that this demographic of families make up a small minority of families in the BPS, and instead tend to send their children to private schools or move out of the district altogether. Coincidentally, two of the parents I interviewed were white women who are current BPS parents with one child in the BPS. Both acknowledged their privilege as middle-upper class families without me prompting them, especially when they brought up their personal financial ability to 'go private' if they didn't get assigned to the schools they wanted. I appreciate that they acknowledge their privilege, and what they shared with me is evidence for how the school selection model is inequitable.

III. Navigating and Social Capital

I have been talking about the concept of 'navigating' throughout this episode because every single one of the people I interviewed brought up navigating in one way or another. It clearly plays a crucial role in the current school selection model, but a lot of the folks I interviewed noted that those who are able to navigate the system are the same people who benefit from it. Lots of families in Boston are not aware that enrolling their children in school involves such a time consuming process. They expect it to be as straightforward as walking into any nearby school to register and enroll the same day.[105] The first step of navigating the school selection process is knowing that it exists, and families who learn about it too late, may miss the priority deadlines and wind up with undesirable school assignments.

Social networks are a big part of navigating the school selection model, because BPS families use their networks to learn about various schools and just generally how the school selection process works. This can look like learning about school reputations based on personal

[104] Interview with Luke.
[105] Interview with Emily.

experiences, rather than from the information that BPS provides. Both of the parents I interviewed mentioned that they only learned about the registration process through hearing from other BPS families or reading online, and they did not realize how complicated it was until they began the ranking aspect. Helen also mentioned that on a school tour, she informed a parent who had no idea that she needed to begin registering her child immediately, or else they would come close to missing the priority deadline, which goes to show that there is a lack of awareness about the complexity of the model as well as a lack of outreach by the district on how the process works.

Because the process is so complicated, being able to navigate it is definitely an advantage. This makes me wonder about equity, because even though all families have to go through the same process and lottery, families who don't have as much information or the ability to really engage in the process are less likely to find schools that will be the best fit for their families.

When I asked Emily about who she thinks benefits from the current school selection model and who does not, she said that she believes the parents who can navigate the model are the most successful. Really interestingly though, she made it a point to emphasize that anyone can develop the ability to navigate, regardless of things like race, class, and langage. I thought it was fascinating that Emily brought this up because we can be quick to assume that certain populations may be the most disadvantaged. These assumptions are partially grounded in reality because of patterns of oppression, but Emily seemed to want to challenge what inequity looks like in the BPS and emphasize that there are families who are often labelled as disadvantaged by race, class, and language who *are* successful in navigating.[106]

If inequity in navigation ability cannot be tracked to race, class, and language groups, then social capital is a really important framework to think about this concept of navigation. Social capital plays a large role in the ability to navigate because navigation itself is a benefit gained from membership in social networks. Families *can* navigate the school selection process individually from social networks, but most of the folks I interviewed spoke to how the majority of BPS families rely on social networks in one form or another. At the end of the day, greater social capital means greater ability to navigate the process, which leads to more informed school choice decisions, and often more successful school experiences. This means that families who are able to put in the time, energy, and resources into researching schools and navigating the process are more likely to wind up at schools that are a good fit for the student and the family.

A. Sharing Knowledge

One aspect of social capital that I want to talk about is the sharing of knowledge. This plays a large role in being able to navigate the school selection model, because sharing knowledge is

[106] Interview with Emily.

how families learn about things like school reputations, personal experiences with schools, and also just learning about how the process works. For example, Helen's child will age out of their current school in a few years, and something that gives her family peace of mind is that they know families with students at the school their child is likely to attend. These connections will provide them with personal feedback on their experiences, and this feedback will inform the decision Helen and her family make on what school their child will go to.[107]

Kasey also found that shared knowledge in the form of word of mouth contributes greatly to the positive reputation of her school and recalled an anecdote from her child's daycare. Kasey sends her child to a daycare run by a Colombian woman, and when they first met and the woman learned that Kasey works at a school, she told Kasey how she knows her school and knows that Colombians love going to her school. Kasey's school is largely Colombian, and the fact that someone outside of Kasey's school community, but who was part of the Colombian community and network had such a positive view of the school demonstrates the power of shared knowledge amongst social networks.[108]

Luke also talked about the power of shared knowledge in school decision making, telling me that families will select schools with low tier ratings, if people in their network share positive experiences with the school. Two of the people I interviewed work at schools where this is the case. Kasey, who we met earlier, and Miles both work at schools that are tier 3 schools, but still beloved by members of the school community, and I think this is really a testament to both the power of shared knowledge and the sense of belonging that exists at these schools.

IV. Conclusion

Alright, I know that was a lot, and I'm sure you now understand what inspired the title of this podcast. The school selection model that Boston uses right now is so complicated that there are aspects of it that I still struggle to wrap my head around. This complication means that being able to navigate the system is *so* important for families in order to get a desirable school assignment. Not everyone has the same ability to navigate though, and this is what ultimately creates inequity in the district.

Now that we have this understanding of how the system works, I'll spend the next episode unpacking how families make sense of the school selection model and the repercussions that this has on the district.

Thank you so much for turning, and I'll see you next time, for the final episode of *It's Complicated!*

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[107] Interview with Helen.
[108] Interview with Kasey.

Episode Five: Finding Community and Belonging

How do Boston families find belonging as they navigate the school selection model? What are the consequences of this? And can both desegregation and belonging be achieved at the same time?

Welcome to the fifth and final episode of *It's Complicated!* In the last episode, I went over how the current school selection model in Boston works, how families have to navigate it, and the inequities this causes. In this episode, I'm going to shift more to look at what *happens* as families navigate the school selection model and how they find community and belonging. Then I'll wrap up by sharing some final thoughts and suggestions.

I. Introduction

Last time I went over how social networks are a big part of how families navigate the process, and I'm going to dig into that a little more, but this time I'm focused on a different aspect of social networks. I noticed a pattern of 'following' that came out of my interviews, and by this I mean when families start out at one school, but end up following other families in their network to different schools that have more members of their network. To me, this shows the strength of social networks in the BPS and emphasizes how much families want to find belonging. So first I'm going to talk about 'following,' what it means, and the effects that it has. Then I'll go back to the relationship between desegregation and belonging. This will lead to some final thoughts and suggestions for where the BPS can go from here, but for now, let's jump in!

II. 'Following' and Concentrations of Networks

I noticed a pattern across the stories that people shared with me in my interviews of families following other families in their network to schools, which leads to a concentration of similar families within schools. I think this is very related to shared knowledge, because families gain information from other members of their network, which leads them to transfer schools.

A specific example of this comes from a story that Luke shared with me among a community of North African families. He spends a lot of time at a community soccer field where there's a mix of families from different schools and has observed a network of North African families who come to the soccer field. Luke recognized one of the families because their children go to the same school as his kids, but he also observed that almost all of the children of the other North African families go to a nearby charter school in the BPS. By the next year, the family that used to be at his school had transferred to the charter school to be with the other North African families in their network. This is an example of how knowledge is shared and how it informs the decision to transfer their children to a school with more families from their network.[109]

[109] Interview with Luke.

Luke actually talked about a few similar examples, pointing out one school with a concentration of Haitian Creole families and two with large Chinese populations. This can definitely be attributed to the residential patterns of the city, since the selection model prioritizes proximity, but it's the 'following' that further contributes to concentrations of populations in schools. In this way, I think that following almost undermines the equity and racial mixing that the home based school selection model wanted to achieve. The lottery prevents the clustering that traditional neighborhood schools would cause, but when families follow members of their network to schools, it almost defeats the purpose of the lottery, because they increase the concentration of their network at a particular school. It is important to note that this does not happen across the district, and the schools that Luke mentioned to me are specific examples where this phenomenon is happening.

I'm using the word concentration here as a proxy for segregation because ultimately, these are examples of segregated schools. Because segregation is illegal, people are very hesitant to use the word to describe schools with high concentrations of one racial or ethnic group, but in my opinion, there is no denying that these schools are segregated. We know that segregation is bad and we recognize that the current school selection model is an attempt to desegregate the district, but what is happening in the BPS is fascinating to me because it demonstrates this phenomenon where families, in search of belonging, actually end up segregating schools. This reminds me of the school choice debate of whether or not parent values segregate schools, and according to these observations, the parent value in finding community and belonging absolutely does.

I also find the examples that Luke shared interesting because they are all concentrations of non-white communities that rely on languages other than English. For these communities, their way of navigating is to find and follow members of their network to schools where they know they will be welcomed and accepted. This is not surprising, but I find some irony in it, given the history of desegregation in the BPS. During the Busing Crisis, the working class white community and the predominantly white school committee were being blamed for being racist and upholding segregation. However given these examples of following, it looks like communities of color are the ones that are segregating the district. This is definitely not fueled by intentions of re-segregating schools, but begs the question: in search of belonging, is segregation like this justifiable? And can both belonging and desegregation be achieved at the same time? In both the current school selection model and in busing initiatives, it seems like desegregation models can only achieve desegregation *or* belonging.

III. Desegregation and Belonging

I want to talk a little bit more about Kasey's school. It's a really interesting example to me because it's such a segregated school, but is so beloved by the community it serves. It's located in East Boston, and due to the geography of Boston, East Boston is physically separated across

the harbor from the rest of the city. The school is segregated in a number of other ways too, for example, it's about 95% Hispanic, nearly 100% high needs, and has the highest concentration of English language learners by percentage, as reported by Kasey.[110] It is also a tier 3 school, but is still highly sought after by East Boston residents, especially by those who have members of their network already at the school, and this shows that they are willing to sacrifice educational quality in order to be with the network and to find belonging.

Kasey's school is certainly unique because it has the added separation from the city of being located in East Boston, but as Luke's story earlier demonstrates, similar dynamics exist at other schools across the city. The school Miles works at is another example of a school that is loved by its community, even though it is also a tier 3 school. When I asked about segregation at his school, Miles said that the school continues to enroll the same population because it's historically been this way, and members of the community find comfort in that.[111] Based on this comment, it seems like history plays a role in the segregation of schools, and maybe it is the model that Boston's residents have gotten used to, making it hard to move away from. This reminds me of the fears of change and unwillingness to let go of a sense of community that emerged from the Irish American antibusing community in the era of mandated busing.

Finding community and belonging at segregated schools was also represented in some of the feelings that students of busing programs shared. For example, Wise Rowe remembered having a strong sense of belonging at her all Black school and not at her new school, and METCO students mentioned this too, acknowledging that they would probably have felt more at home if they attended school in the city.

As I mentioned before, belonging relies on relationships and being surrounded by people from your community, but it is also something that can be fostered by the school's environment. For example, Miles's school has a large Cape Verdean population, and the family liaison at the school is also Cape Verdean and he grew up in the neighborhood. Because of this, he can really connect to students and families at a cultural level in their language. Kasey also spoke of the work her school puts in providing support for their families in and out of school, and she talked about how her school is a safe place for students and families, where they will be welcomed, loved, and supported.[112]

In my interviews with parents, both parents expressed a value in finding a welcoming school environment that would foster a sense of community. For example, Kate mentioned that, as a two mom family, one thing they were looking for in a school is an environment that would be welcoming of different identities. Helen valued the sense of community too, and was worried

[110] Interview with Kasey.
[111] Interview with Miles.
[112] Interview with Kasey.

that the current school selection model takes away from the sense of neighborhood community, since the lottery splits neighborhood families up.[113]

Luke had an answer to why finding a sense of community and belonging emerges as such a priority for families in the school selection process. When he was talking about the phenomenon of following that I discussed before, he admitted that he would do the same thing too. He said that if he suddenly had to move to a new country, he would try to get his kids to go to school with other families from Boston or from any of his various social networks.[114]

This desire to find people you relate to in unfamiliar situations transcends schools, it is a purely human desire. In Boston's school selection model however, when this desire is acted on, it tends to have segregative effects, which again relates back to the relationship between desegregation and belonging and whether they can both be achieved at the same time.

IV. Final Thoughts

I can't emphasize enough how complicated the Boston school selection model is, and what it asks and expects of parents. While it *does* attempt to create equity and maintain levels of racial mixing, there are still families who benefit from the system more than others. In this case, families who are better prepared to navigate the process are the ones to benefit from the model. The ability to navigate comes from involvement in social networks, where families can learn information about different schools and about how the school selection model functions.

Community and belonging are also a priority of families in this school choice model, and based on my interviews, it seems like many families are successful in finding belonging in their schools. While this is great, it contributes to a phenomenon where families 'follow' others in their network to schools in order to find a sense of community and belonging. This causes clusters of certain networks and communities in schools, which leads to an unintentional segregation of schools. This makes me wonder whether or not desegregation and belonging can be achieved within the same school selection model, because the examples I looked at in this podcast make it seem like there can either be desegregation *or* belonging, not both.

A. Summary

This podcast has covered so much and before I wrap up, I want to go remind you what we've talked about. I originally posed the question: *what is the relationship between past and present solutions to desegregation in the Boston Public Schools and what gets lost in the search for desegregation, integration, and equity?*

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[113] Interview with Helen.
[114] Interview with Luke.

I started out with the Boston Busing Crisis, then Operation Exodus and METCO, and ended with the current school selection model. Moving through these different solutions shows how busing in the 60s and 70s were not great desegregation solutions, so the city turned to school choice models instead. The school selection model that is used today derives from previous iterations of school choice models, and still has goals of maintaining racial balance and increasing equity.

One of the blind spots of these desegregation solutions is the sense of community and belonging that families and students desire. In the case of mandated busing, they did technically desegregate, but the fallout of anti-Black racism meant that students did not find any sense of belonging. Operation Exodus and METCO didn't reach as much desegregation as mandated busing, but they still mixed Black and white students. Regardless, students still didn't find belonging because they were bused to schools that were so different from their home communities. In the current school selection model, I learned that belonging really matters to families as they select schools, so much so that some families actually end up re-segregating schools by concentrating with other members of their network at certain schools.

Even though the school selection model is complicated and causes inequity, it does work for the district, so they're probably going to keep using it. There's always changes being made to respond to different problems that come up. One of the most recent big changes in the BPS is that they're moving towards the K-6 and 7-12 model. This does mean that there will be a lot of shifting around of grades, especially fifth through eighth grade, but this should really streamline an aspect of the confusion.

The re-segregation that is occurring under the current school selection model leads me to believe that it's not a great model for achieving desegregation. At the same time though, I don't have a better solution in mind. And I also worry that implementing a whole new school assignment model would take too large of a toll on the district. I believe that in order for there to be a solution that achieves both desegregation and belonging, a cultural shift at a structural level is necessary, and unfortunately this issue is above what the school district is able to do and what I'm able to cover in this podcast.

B. Recommendations

Since it seems like the district will continue to use the current school selection model, here are a couple of recommendations that I have for how it can be improved and become more equitable. First of all, I think that navigation needs to become more accessible, through things like greater outreach to families, especially new families. In addition to this, there should be more solid plans for families who miss the enrollment deadlines, plans that would give them permanent seats for example, rather than making new students transfer only being at a school for a few months. My last suggestion for the school selection model has to do with the tier system. I don't think it's an accurate representation of what actually attending a given school will be like, and I think that this

should be more clearly communicated to families who rely on the tier ratings in their ranking of schools.

My final two recommendations have more do with improving the quality of schools. I talked earlier about how the lottery creates a sense of 'winning' and 'losing,' because the schools vary in quality. If schools were all the same quality, then there would be no 'winning' or 'losing' the lottery because families would be pleased with any assignment, so I think that more energy should go into improving the schools that are considered lower quality. I also think that all BPS schools should work towards fostering a sense of belonging and community in their school environments so that all students and families can find belonging, whether they attend schools with members of their existing networks or not. Through my interviews, I learned about a couple of schools that are already doing this, but if all schools are able to cultivate a sense of belonging, then families will not have to search as hard for it.

V. Conclusion

At the end of the day, the fear of change and the yearning for belonging are natural human desires, and this becomes difficult to reconcile while working towards the desegregation and integration of schools. I don't believe that desegregation and integration have to be mutually exclusive, and I'm really hopeful that the Boston Public Schools will be able to achieve both, but I know that it won't be easy. The city of Boston has a vibrant and multicultural community that is worth celebrating. They also have a public school district that is full of administrators, educators, and families who care deeply about equity and the success of their students. I have no doubt that these values will motivate the district to keep working towards a model that can both maintain racial mixing and a sense of belonging.

With that, I'm gonna bring this to a close, and I want to thank you once again for listening to *It's Complicated.*

VI. Acknowledgements

It's Complicated would not be possible without the support from a number of different people. I'd like to thank my parents, particularly my dad, for making the effort of taking us out of the suburban bubble, showing us the Boston Public Schools, and teaching us how to practice empathy and compassion. I also want to thank my advisors, Professors Light Carruyo and Jaime Del Razo for their guidance and support throughout this process.

And last but not least, I cannot express enough gratitude and appreciation for my interview participants for sharing their thoughts and experiences with me. The Boston Public Schools school selection model is insanely complicated, and I would have been so lost if not for their careful descriptions of the process and their thoughtful reflections. They illuminated aspects of

the school selection process that I never would have found in the literature, and for this I am extremely grateful. I'm inspired by their commitment to public education and to making the BPS be the best it can, and I can only hope to follow in their footsteps.

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Appendix

Interview questions for administrators:

1. What is your role in the Boston Public Schools? How long have you been in that role? In the BPS?
2. What can you tell me about school choice in the BPS?
3. What do you think parents value in schools and in the education of their children?
    - How do those values play into their ranking of schools?
4. What kinds of relationships or connections do you have with BPS parents?
    - Does the topic of school choice ever arise? If so, what do they say about school choice?
5. What does parent involvement look like in your school?
6. What kinds of parents are reaching out and getting involved most?
7. Do you still view the BPS as segregated? Why do you think that is the case?
8. Who benefits from the current school selection system and who is left out?

Additional questions for administrators who work in a school (not at the district level)

1. Do a majority of students at your school live in the community or in walking distance?
2. Do you have any sense of why parents decided to pick your school?
3. What percentage of the parents at your school had a sense of how to navigate the system?

Interview questions for parents:

1. How long has your family been in the BPS?
    - How many schools have you been at in the BPS?
2. What can you tell me about school choice in Boston and how you've seen it and experienced it as a parent?
3. What factors played into your ranking of schools?
4. Did you get to visit schools? If so, how did it impact your decision making?
5. Is there a parent council parent presence at your school? Does it add to the sense of community at the school?
6. What grades does your school go up to? What are the options after that? Is there a feeder option?
7. What drove your decision to go public instead of private off the bat?
8. Share some of the positives of your BPS experiences so far - why have you stayed?
9. Before you began the registration process, did you have any idea what you were getting into?
    - What were your reactions when you started to realize how complicated the process is?
10. Who benefits from the current school selection system and who is left out?