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Dallas Students Take Flight

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In 1954, when *Brown vs. Board of Education* (*Brown*) ruled that segregation was illegal, Dallas, like most southern cities, was very residentially segregated and not eager to welcome black children into white schools as mandated. The city dragged its feet far longer than others, and in 1961 it was the very last large school district in the country to allow black students to attend white schools (SMU Law 1). Busing for integration was implemented even farther behind other cities, but white flight out of the school district occurred in Dallas to a greater degree than most other metropolitan areas. Currently, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the Dallas school district has the second lowest percentage of white students, only behind Detroit (“Status and Trends”). There is no question that residential segregation in Dallas was happening long before segregated schools became illegal, leaving uncertainty about the true causes of the wholesale abandoning of the Dallas Independent School District (DISD) by whites. Some researchers believe that the fear of integration doomed the process before it started, while others believe that the flawed implementation is responsible for its failure. I believe that the racial and political atmosphere in Dallas at the time supports a combination of both explanations, as the resisted, prolonged roll-out facilitated a level of fear that the actual implementation could never overcome.

The *Brown* ruling was misunderstood by many cities, but Dallas carried it a step further by attempting to ignore it. *Brown* declared that state laws establishing separate black and white schools were unconstitutional; in other words, it ruled that a black child who lived closest to a white school could not be prohibited from attending that school on the basis of his/her race. *Brown* did not, however, mandate any sort of school integration, or set any guidelines on what percentage of a school’s population should come from minority vs. majority racial groups. Furthermore, it did not set a specific timeline for when states must allow black children to enroll in previously white schools, instead using the vague guidelines of “with all deliberate speed.” Dallas city leaders used this leeway to introduce many legal roadblocks, declaring that the *Brown* ruling contradicted the Texas state constitution. They even conducted a city-wide vote in 1960, and the results were unsurprisingly 4 to 1 against school desegregation (SMU Law 1). City leaders, not wanting to experience the violent and angry mobs that met black students attending white schools in Little Rock and Charlotte, were in no hurry to allow desegregation. With eighteen black children enrolled in a previously white school

in 1961, Dallas was the largest city in the south to still have a segregated school system (Kiviat 1). Even seven years after the ruling, many people in Dallas still preferred to interpret “with all deliberate speed” to mean “not in our lifetime” (McCorkle 2), and black children trickled into white schools in a less than speedy manner.

Just as the courts were evaluating the impact of desegregation on the school system, city leaders were concerned about the impact it would have on the choices of middle class white residents. White flight traditionally refers to the movement of white people from urban areas into the suburbs, often precipitated by the arrival of minority residents into their neighborhoods. From a sociological perspective, white flight can be the result of many changing dynamics, from crime rates to school quality, and so individual cause and effect relationships are difficult to identify. The Cliometric Society, an academic organization that studies economic theory, developed two hypotheses to explain why white urban residents choose to decamp to outlying areas. The Pull Theory maintains that people are lured by the amenities that suburbs provide, including newer (and often larger) homes, lower taxes, and improved civic services. The Push Theory, on the other hand, implies that movement to the suburbs is affected by the changing social conditions in the central cities – increased crime, racial unrest, deteriorating city services, and school desegregation (Bickford 2). Although the arguments for the Pull Theory are valid and plausible, data tends to more fully support the Push Theory. In Dallas, the statistics certainly show that white families felt the push out of the school district and took their students elsewhere.

In 1969, the DISD was still 59% white, but by 2003, it was only 7% white (McCorkle 213). The flight from the school district is indisputable, yet data presents a curious picture of the Dallas landscape during the 1960s and 1970s that contributed to this. Although black children were attending previously all-white schools after 1961, they were doing so in relatively small numbers. DISD declared itself desegregated in 1967, but this was a major overstatement, as zones were drawn to allow segregated schools to continue and “a dual system still existed” (SMU Law 1). Desegregation did not cause major upheaval in Dallas in the 1960s because it simply was not happening in a major way. The city really began to experience issues with white flight once schools were required to integrate via busing in the following decade.

In 1966, James Coleman, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University, published a study that found that black

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children who attended integrated schools would have higher test scores if the majority of their classmates were white (Kiviat 1). This study ignited political fervor to actively and aggressively integrate schools, often busing children far from their neighborhoods in effort to achieve more racial balance in the classrooms. Even though civil rights activists demanded that black students had access to equal quality schools, they did not insist that they attend the same schools as whites, and many black parents were as opposed to busing as white parents were (Minow 10). In Dallas, black parents were angry with the plan to close some of the all-black neighborhood schools, although they were dissatisfied with the quality of education the attending students were receiving. An August, 1971 survey found that one-third of the African American parents in Dallas opposed busing, and those who supported it did so because they believed it was the only means to ensure a quality education for their students (McCorkle 52, 61). Despite uncertainty from parents of all races, the first students in Dallas were bused for the 1971-72 school year, and this is when white flight in Dallas became such a major issue.

There are two points of view about why white families removed their children from the DISD and moved their families to the suburbs: the fear of school integration and the failure of its implementation. Statistics do support fear as a valid theory, as white flight did spike when busing was first introduced. Although parents feared a myriad of things, including scholastic degradation, increased school violence, and decreased property values (or a combination of these and others), all fears fell under the umbrella of the racism that was widespread in Dallas at the time. Christine Rossell, a political science professor who has studied white flight extensively, claims that a surge in white flight is experienced before the opening of school in the first year and during the first year of desegregation, but that it levels off after that (Rossell 676). Her research shows that families make decisions based on the fear of what might happen when minority students are introduced into majority white classrooms. Because of this fear, "white families did not perceive a choice between an integrated and all-white school but rather between an all-white school and one that is almost certain to become all-black" (Rossell 689). In other words, white families worry that when black children attend their neighborhood school, their children will suffer in some way. Rossell maintains that white flight is due to parents refusing to participate in the plan and being unwilling to wait to see whether the problems they anticipate actually arise. Rossell's hypothesis did ring true in Dallas as a staggering number of white students did not show up for school in the fall of 1971. By the end of the first week, white students who were assigned to be bused to three of the all-black high schools seemed to disappear. The numbers show the extent of the boycott: "of 180 white students assigned to Roosevelt, only 21 enrolled; of 275 assigned to Lincoln, only 10 enrolled; and of 191 assigned to Pinkston, only 34 enrolled" (Linden 83). Fear clearly sent those students running from DISD before the first day of school.

Not every family who left DISD moved to the suburbs. Those who could afford private or parochial schools often chose to move their children rather than move the entire family. In large school districts like Dallas, white parents often felt as if their voice had little impact on future

school decisions (Farley 132), and many felt helpless to effect any change should they have a negative experience. Even some who could afford private school tuition still chose to move. White families understood the relationship between school quality and real estate values, and they were reluctant to wait for their property values to fall. Parents "judge the quality of a school mainly on the kind of families whose children are predominant in the classrooms, so when black children started showing up, white families attempted to circumvent integration by moving to school districts with majority white populations" (Bickford 3). Real estate professionals agree that the quality of a neighborhood school is a top criterion in the house hunting process. Any negative change in school quality will therefore have a negative impact on property values, and the fear of school quality decline was a valid one. As reported in March of 1971, students at Dallas' all-black schools were testing below 96% of the entire United States (McCorkle 32), while students at Dallas' all-white schools were testing only slightly below those at Highland Park High School, which was the best public high school in the state. Concern about how the influx of these students would dilute academic progress, along with fears of classroom disruption, were rampant among white parents prior to the start of school. Although some argue that parents were masking their racism behind academic and safety concerns, a mass exodus was still the outcome. Those who moved were unlikely to admit that they were leaving to avoid having their child sit next to a black child in the classroom, so it is difficult to determine exactly the type of fear that drove the departure.

Proof also exists that white flight in Dallas was caused by the failure of the integration process. The poor implementation of the integration/busing initiative certainly contributed to further abandonment of the DISD by white students. White parents might have been willing to send their students to neighborhood schools with other black students, but they were clearly not willing to allow their students to bus across town to a predominantly black school. At the close of the 1971-72 school year, about 5000 students were being bused – only 100 of whom were white (McCorkle 62). Over six thousand white students had left the school district, "but no one was sure where the white students had gone...one estimate had 40% moving to the suburbs of Plano, Richardson, Garland, Lewisville and Duncanville" (Linden 101). No satisfactory way could be found to get white students to attend predominantly black schools (Linden 84), and the white flight continued. The following four years saw similar losses, as problems with integration continued to frustrate both white and black parents. By 1975, DISD had lost almost 28,000 white students, at which point they constituted only 45% of the students in the district (McCorkle 77).

In addition to refusing to bus their students to minority schools, threats of violence and actual fighting caused some students to leave integrated schools. On September 17, 1971, one hundred fifty white parents pulled their children from a Dallas junior high school based on threats of violence and unrest (McCorkle 62), although nothing actually happened. Other schools reported that white students were being beaten and robbed by black students, and some of these accounts were true, but complaints were not just coming from white parents. Black

parents complained that white students were getting special treatment and that their students were uncomfortable in majority white schools, both from the cultural differences and from exposure to affluence at levels they were ill accustomed. Neither black nor white students were happy with the situation, but the white students often had more choice in where they could go. Although not all white families could afford to move, “families of color faced not only economic hurdles in moving to prosperous communities with good schools but also direct discrimination in the mortgage and housing markets” (Minow 25). While many white students fled to private schools or suburbs, most black students were left to ride buses across town to schools that had fewer and fewer white students with which to integrate.

Not surprisingly, the fear-based white flight of year one actually contributed to the failure of integration in the following years. It can be argued that the initial mass exodus caused the failure because of the reduced number of white students who were available to integrate previously all-black schools. By 1981, the DISD superintendent admitted that it would be mathematically impossible to eliminate all one-race schools because there were only 29.5% white students still left in the district (McCorkle 117). Integration failed, to some extent, because of the unwillingness of white students to participate, although little blame can be placed on parents who maintained that they were looking out for the best interests of their children.

Exacerbating the problem of absent white students was the fact that test scores for those remaining did not improve, despite the Coleman reports’ predictions otherwise. In Grades 4-6, black students who were bused to white schools scored beneath black students who remained in their neighborhood schools in reading and math, in some instances by as much as 18 points (McCorkle 146). This demonstrated to both white and black parents that integration was harming students of both races, both socially and scholastically. By 1982, Dallas 9th graders were scoring the lowest in reading and the 2nd lowest in math among the largest eight Texas school districts (McCorkle 146), so the continued movement to suburban schools could be justified from a quality of education perspective.

The failure of integration caused continued worry about urban property values. Upper class, high status whites were unwilling to live in an area with public school issues, regardless of whether their children attended them. Status consciousness cannot be overlooked as a reason to abandon a neighborhood with a problem school. “Middle class residents select a neighborhood based on the social status it conveys to the rest of society” (Bickford 3), so it is plausible to attribute some of the movement to the newer suburbs as fleeing the stigma associated with integrated schools. The suburbs saw a net gain of 36,600 white students between 1971 and 1975 (McCorkle 78), and although not all were coming from DISD, re-segregation in the greater Dallas area was happening just as fervently as integration was being pushed.

Because Dallas experienced white flight in such large numbers, sociologists and historians explore whether other characteristics of the city contributed to this pattern. In similar large cities throughout the south, desegregation was more widespread in the years before the busing initiative was

introduced, so schools had more time to adapt to the changing racial enrollment. Some maintain that the slow speed with which Dallas implemented simple desegregation accelerated the white flight, as no one had the opportunity to give a slower paced desegregation a chance at success. Another characteristic of Dallas was the abundance of other choices in both established and newly forming white suburbs. Studies show that the greater the availability of largely white suburban school districts, the greater the percent decline in white enrollment (Farley et al 133). In 1965, 57% of the Dallas Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) residents lived in the city, which is a relatively large number for a city with so many suburban choices; to compare, in Dayton, Ohio, only 32% of the SMSA lived in the city (Blakeslee). Cities that have a high percentage usually do not experience significant white flight because the urban area is assumed to provide sufficient neighborhood choices to meet the residents’ needs. However, Highland Park was the only urban area not impacted by integration, and a high percentage of residents were priced out of that exclusive enclave. “To lose public education was to lose the city,” (Linden 174) as Dallas certainly learned. As tail lights glowed in all directions from vehicles pointed away from the city, Dallas was left to figure out how to resurrect a school district that was bleeding white students year after year.

Dallas is also different from other cities in that it continued to experience white flight even as forced busing ended. This contradicts the findings of several studies that document a reduction in white flight after the spike of the first year (Rossell 676). Movement to the suburbs occurs even today, despite the fact that very few white students still attend DISD schools. This can be attributed to the fact that Dallas public school quality has not kept up to the levels of many suburban districts, as evidenced by the disparity in numbers of National Merit Semi-Finalists. In 2010, there were only three finalists across all 43 DISD high schools, two from Bishop Lynch and one from Hillcrest; Highland Park High School alone had 16, and the three Plano high schools had 86 (“National Merit”). Poor test scores certainly qualify as a push factor, especially for residents of a city that is perpetually proving its worth and competing to be world class. Parents who had the means to provide their children a better education clearly had options outside of DISD, and they took advantage of them in large numbers.

School desegregation and integration were complex social issues that had far reaching effects in Dallas in the last half of the twentieth century. Obviously, some degree of movement to the suburbs would have happened regardless, but “if it is impossible to measure the precise impact of school desegregation on white flight, it is equally insupportable to claim that there is no effect whatsoever” (Ravitch 145). As shown, there are valid arguments for fear based white flight and failure based white flight, and the combination of both is likely a better explanation for the mass exodus to the suburbs. Like many sociological trends, the data does not point to only one explanation, but it does prove that white students abandoned DISD en masse, and this cannot be explained away by the lure of the suburbs or the status consciousness of middle-class white residents. School desegregation/integration did not cause white flight in Dallas just as its elimination did not end it. However, the damage to the school system was done, and the lingering troubles

continue to dissuade white parents from sending their children to DISD schools.

Although DISD is now considered “unitary”, which means that it is not legally segregated, it is still very much a self-segregated district. Many believe that this is just fine, as it puts the students back in their neighborhood schools with community support. Even James Coleman revised his original findings to admit that forced integration had caused white flight in big cities, particularly in those like Dallas that had several adjacent school districts that were majority white. His revised 1975 report warned that policies going forward should not be so broad or system-wide, going so far as to admit that “the courts are probably the worst instruments of social policy” (Ravitch 135).

Although Dallas has always been a racially and economically segregated city, the experience with integration damaged the school district in ways that were neither anticipated nor managed. Interestingly, as emotionally devastating as busing was to Dallas citizens, no more than 12% of the students were ever bused for desegregation purposes (McCorkle 211). The fear of the possibility far outweighed the actual risk, likely because there were not enough white students left to bus or enough remaining white schools to which black students could be bused. In the 1970s, white parents voted with their feet, and their footsteps continue to echo throughout the city. Had Dallas been less reluctant to implement desegregation originally, perhaps mandated integration would not have failed as badly as it did. While integration achieved through busing was never to be an effective solution anywhere, the makeup of DISD might look markedly different today if white students remained and assimilated back into their neighborhood schools just as the black children did. Forced integration ended, but the numbers continue to preclude natural integration from ever getting a chance.

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