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THE CHANGING FACE OF INDIANAPOLIS: 1970-1979 Desegregation order transformed IPS

Schneider, Rob. **Indianapolis Star** [Indianapolis, Ind] 28 Dec 1999: A.1.

Abstract

When asked about the impact of the desegregation order, IPS Superintendent Duncan Pat Pritchett quickly comes back to a central point: IPS was found guilty of operating a segregated school system. While Indianapolis escaped the extreme violence that accompanied desegregation in other cities such as Boston, the city experienced a white flight to suburbs and out of urban public schools, Vanderstel said.

Full Text

When the Indianapolis Public School Board recently shelved parts of an ambitious redistricting plan, it did so for a simple reason -- parents didn't want it.

What parents wanted was stability. Period.

For once, the board was in a position to do something about it.

More than a year ago, a surprise agreement brought an end to the federal court busing order that began with a lawsuit three decades ago.

The agreement wasn't an instantaneous conclusion to busing, but it offered a phase-out plan that unfolds over an 18-year period.

IPS will have to figure out how to accommodate the students who would have been bused to surrounding townships.

When asked about the impact of the desegregation order, IPS Superintendent Duncan Pat Pritchett quickly comes back to a central point: IPS was found guilty of operating a segregated school system.

It was a decision that affected the lives of thousands of families, making it one of the top events to shape the city.

The decision came after U.S. District Judge S. Hugh Dillin found IPS was guilty of segregation de jure (by law) in

1971. As a result, thousands of students were bused within IPS to accommodate a de segregation plan.

Over the next 10 years, additional court hearings and meetings were held to work out what else should be done to integrate area schools.

After another court ruling, nearly 7,000 black students were bused in August 1981 to Decatur, Franklin, Lawrence, Perry, Warren and Wayne townships. Pike and Washington townships were excluded because they already had substantial black enrollments.

Opposition mounts

Stanley Warren of DePauw University and David G. Vanderstel of The Polis Center at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis write in the Encyclopedia of Indianapolis that the decision upset a number of people.

Parents of township schoolchildren who opposed the busing order began a futile campaign to oust Dillin. Others simply moved, while some blacks were upset about the loss of neighborhood schools.

The upside of the order was that it fostered an integrated school system, Pritchett said. The downside was the unpredictability it generated as students' assignments were altered to comply with the order, sometimes on very short notice.

IPS's enrollment dropped from 108,000 in 1971 to 47,000 by the early 1990s.

To understand how the city got to Dillin's desegregation order, Vanderstel said, it is necessary to look back to the 1920s when the city shifted to a segregated system.

No doubt race relations had room for improvement before the 1920s, but the sudden change to segregated schools is somewhat of a mystery, Vanderstel noted.

He attributes it to the strong influence of the Ku Klux Klan and the pervasive white supremacy that evidenced itself in the city's anti-immigrant, anti-black, anti-Catholic, anti-foreigner attitudes at the time.

While Indianapolis escaped the extreme violence that accompanied desegregation in other cities such as Boston, the city experienced a white flight to suburbs and out of urban public schools, Vanderstel said.

The peaceful compliance, though, might have been a double-edged sword, one observer noted.

Some in the community believed that the peaceful desegregation of schools would bring about quality education, said John L. Krauss, a former deputy mayor of Indianapolis who now is a senior fellow at the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment at Indiana University.

"They were two distinct things," Krauss said. "We may have peacefully complied with school desegregation, but it may have left some people with the false impression that they didn't need to focus on schools anymore. So problems didn't get any better; they got worse, particularly within IPS."

A first major step toward changing the city's segregated system came in 1949, when the state passed a desegregation law. IPS announced a plan of compliance and abolished separate elementary school districts based on race, Vanderstel and Warren point out.

In 1951, black teachers were assigned to white schools. The process of desegregating the high schools was completed in 1953, a move that was resisted by many white residents.

But critics would contend that the city got around the laws because property owners and real estate agents excluded blacks from particular neighborhoods.

In 1968, investigations conducted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and federal attorneys, coupled with a parent's complaint, led the U.S. Justice Department to file suit against the IPS board.

Pritchett said the desegregation order became a way of life for many of the school system's staff. There were hundreds of issues, hearings, decisions, plans over how to comply and staff development to ensure that teachers were ready to teach in a diversified setting.

For the future, Pritchett says the focus of IPS will be on achievement, using the experience it has gained over the past 30 years in developing a diversified system to ensure improvement.

The goal is pretty straightforward, Pritchett said. IPS wants to demonstrate that urban education is a viable experience and that IPS is a good place to send children to school.

All children.

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