

Claremont McKenna College

“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”:  
Looking at the 1964 Freedom Day Boycott as a Means  
of Combating Educational Segregation in New York City Today

submitted to  
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## Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, New York City underwent a number of changes, most of which occurred due to waves of immigration. Amidst all of the changes, the lack of attention students of color in low-income areas received remained constant. The lack of attention resulted in deteriorating school conditions and a widening achievement gap between students of color and white students. In 1964, 10 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, civil rights activists across the City reached a boiling point and organized themselves to protest against the Board of Education. It was an effort that resulted in over 450,000 students walking out of their schools. In spite of this effort, few changes were enacted and the City's public school system remains today as one of the most segregated in the country. This thesis aims to examine the 1964 Freedom Day boycott in an attempt to better understand how the fight for integration has evolved in the years before and after the boycott, as well as what City officials can do today in order to better school conditions and even the playing field for low-income, minority students across the City, regardless of race, class, and religion.

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One foot down, then hop! It's hot.  
Good things for the ones that's got.  
Another jump, now to the left.  
Everybody for hisself.

In the air, now both feet down.  
Since you black, don't stick around.  
Food is gone, the rent is due,  
Curse and cry and then jump two.

All the people out of work,  
Hold for three, then twist and jerk.  
Cross the line, they count you out.  
That's what hopping's all about.

Both feet flat, the game is done.  
They think I lost. I think I won.

-Maya Angelou

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## Introduction

The New York City public school system is the largest in the United States. Once lauded and seen as a blueprint for how other cities should approach public education, today the system is consistently under fire for its lack of racial integration and the declining number of black and Latino kids in its specialized high schools.<sup>1</sup> Mayor Bill de Blasio and school chancellor, Richard Carranza, have vowed to make integration a priority and increase the acceptance of minorities into the specialized high schools.<sup>2</sup> However, this commitment to integration has been complicated by the large representation of Asian students—most of whom come from low-income families—at the specialized high schools.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to increase to make the school truly representative of the diverse population of the city minorities, not just some, have resulted in a variety of ideas such as doing away with the specialized high school standardized test, as well as the creation of a program called Renewal, which dedicated \$773 million to the improvement of the City's worst schools.<sup>4</sup> Despite these well-intentioned ideas, most

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<sup>1</sup> A recent report revealed that across New York's specialized high schools, only 11% of admitted students were black or Hispanic. In Stuyvesant, the city's top high school, only 10 black students and 20 Hispanic students were admitted out of nearly 800 available spots. Although the number of admitted students of color is low, it is an increase from prior years.

<sup>2</sup> Goldstein, Dana. "New York's Schools Chancellor Is Talking About Integration. Can He Make It Happen?" *The New York Times*, September 3, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/nyregion/nyc-chancellor-school-segregation.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Cheney-Rice, Zak. "Stuyvesant Alumni President: Calling NYC Schools 'Segregated' Makes Me 'Feel Like I'm a Bad Person.'" *New York Magazine*, February 7, 2019.

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/02/this-isnt-about-your-feelings.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. "New York Knew Some Schools in Its \$773 Million Plan Were Likely to Fail. It Kept Children in Them Anyway." *The New York Times*, October 26, 2018.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/nyregion/deblasio-school-renewal-bill.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2Feliza-shapiro&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=30&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/nyregion/deblasio-school-renewal-bill.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2Feliza-shapiro&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=30&pgtype=collection).

have either failed or received severe backlash from parents and students alike. As a result, the issue of racial segregation in New York City once again is at an impasse.

Any progress toward integration and educational equity in New York City's public school system has experienced in its long history has occurred from the pressure of black parents and activists. Beginning in the early 1800s, when black parents organized for the ousting of a racist principal, to the late 1930s when black parents organized and aligned themselves with the Teachers' Union, teamwork and organization has always produced the most change in the system. In 1964, an organization of parents of color and civil rights leaders across the city led to the largest boycott in civil rights history. With more than 400,000 students absent from their classes, activists sought to demonstrate their displeasure and frustration with the Board of Education.

The boycott's ability to put pressure on education officials ensured short-term success. Activists secured a plan for integration from education officials that would have seen integration efforts touch over 40,000 students. However, the plan received pushback from white parents across the city, effectively shutting the integration plan down. In 1968, civil rights activists continued in their efforts to integrate schools, or at the very least, gain autonomy through decentralization. However, the activists' inability to organize themselves in a cohesive manner doomed their effort. The fiscal crisis that plagued New York City in the 1970s also resulted in the erasure of any progress that activists had made in years prior. The effort and cooperation between civil rights activists and Board of Education officials has rarely been replicated since and has resulted in New York's public school system remaining one of the most segregated in the country. For



activists today trying to address the persistent inequity in schools, especially in the specialized high schools, the long history of efforts to reform the public school system, in particular grassroots community organization, offers proof of the kind of pressure boycotting puts in applying change to the system.

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Prior to the 1940s, New York City experienced a more just public education system. In fact, New York had one of the more progressive school systems in the country, which offered public education not just for its poor white population, but for blacks as well. In the years following the American Revolution, New York was quick to implement schools for black people. It was these same schools that laid the foundation for a public school system in the City. The first African Free School was founded in 1787 by the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves.<sup>5</sup> The Manumission Society of New York, formed in order to combat the rising kidnappings of black New Yorkers who were then brought to the South and sold as slaves. Apart from protecting the black residents of New York, the group also sought to support blacks, regardless of whether they were free or slaves. The founders, who included John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and George Clinton, intended the school to be for the children of slaves, past and present. It served as a progressive effort to educate these kids in a society that had frequently robbed

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<sup>5</sup> Andrews, Charles C. *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools, from Their Establishment in 1787, to the Present Time : Embracing a Period of More than Forty Years : Also a Brief Account of the Successful Labors, of the New-York Manumission Society*, 1830, 9  
[http://find.gale.com/sas/infomark.do?action=interpret&docType=ECCO&source=library&docLevel=TEXT\\_GRAPHICS&prodId=SAS&userGroupName=nypl&tabID=T001&bookId=SABCB04820400&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&type=getFullCitation&contentSet=ECCO&version=1.0&finalAuth=true](http://find.gale.com/sas/infomark.do?action=interpret&docType=ECCO&source=library&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&prodId=SAS&userGroupName=nypl&tabID=T001&bookId=SABCB04820400&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&type=getFullCitation&contentSet=ECCO&version=1.0&finalAuth=true).

them of that right in the past.<sup>6</sup> In seeking to abolish slavery, many abolitionists turned to education as a key differentiator between whites and blacks, arguing that differences were “the product of environment and education, not innate merit.”<sup>7</sup> The support from this group, although crucial and necessary in giving blacks a sense of freedom, was also hypocritical in that “the society fought on behalf of the freedom, and eventually rights, of black New Yorkers, but often disapproved of how black New Yorkers claimed their right to the streets of New York.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, a number of high-profile members, such as Jay as well as Hamilton, owned slaves themselves and refused to grant them their own freedom.<sup>9</sup> The hypocrisy that often defined the work of the Manumission society set a precedent that would repeat itself in future decades in the realm of public education. Officials often recognized the struggle that minorities faced, yet refused to take the steps necessary to solve the issues.

Until slavery in New York was abolished in 1799, the African Free School existed as only one entity. However, following the abolishment of slavery, the African Free School existed as a network of seven schools scattered across New York.<sup>10</sup> Of these seven schools, five employed black teachers and the system as a whole was run by John

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<sup>6</sup> Andrews, Charles C. *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools, from Their Establishment in 1787, to the Present Time : Embracing a Period of More than Forty Years : Also a Brief Account of the Successful Labors, of the New-York Manumission Society.* 10

<sup>7</sup> The Child and Freedom. “The History of the School,” <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/history/curriculum.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 62.

<sup>9</sup> The New York Manumission Society. “Race and Antebellum New York City,” <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/history/manumission-society.html>.

<sup>10</sup> McCarthy, Andy. “Class Act: Researching New York City Schools with Local History Collections,” October 20, 2014. <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/10/20/researching-nyc-schools>.

Teasman, a black man.<sup>11</sup> The schools employed the Lancasterian model, where teachers would teach a group of older students, who would in turn, teach the younger students.<sup>12</sup> A typical day at this school consisted of learning arithmetic, reading for an allotted amount of time, spelling, and astronomy.<sup>13</sup> A school visitor in 1822 observed a 13-year-old boy running one of the Free Schools. The visitor noted the school was “in excellent order, under the superintendence of Robert Gray, Monitor of order, a boy of 13 years of age, who conducted the various exercises of the School to our admiration and entire approbations.”<sup>14</sup> Although the African Free School would see periods of success and had many supporters, it was ultimately threatened by the racism of its leaders. There were several reports of racism against Charles C. Andrews, a white man who replaced John Teasman as principal of the African Free School.<sup>15</sup> Andrews served as principal for over 20 years before resigning in 1931 due to the racist incidents that surrounded him. In one incident, Andrews reportedly whipped a black student for calling a black man a “gentleman.”<sup>16</sup> Andrews also strongly supported sending freed slaves back to Liberia, a stance that was unpopular at the time.<sup>17</sup> In voicing these opinions, Andrews subjected himself to the anger and frustration of black parents, who subsequently organized

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<sup>11</sup> McCarthy, Andy. “Class Act: Researching New York City Schools with Local History Collections.”

<sup>12</sup> Andrews, Charles C. *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools, from Their Establishment in 1787, to the Present Time : Embracing a Period of More than Forty Years : Also a Brief Account of the Successful Labors, of the New-York Manumission Society.* 17

<sup>13</sup> The Child and Freedom. “The History of the School,”

<sup>14</sup> The Child and Freedom. “The History of the School,”

<sup>15</sup> Charles C. Andrews. “Read AFS Bios,”

<https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/bios/charles-andrews.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Charles C. Andrews. “Read AFS Bios,”

<sup>17</sup> Teachers vs. Parents. “The History of the School,”

<https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/history/teachers-vs-parents.html>.

themselves and forced him to resign.<sup>18</sup> Andrews' resignation spurred the Manumission Society to acknowledge that "it would be more satisfactory to those who send their children to our schools if a person of their own color could be obtained competent to conduct a school in a suitable manner."<sup>19</sup> Andrews' actions demonstrated to the leaders of the Manumission Society that children of color were best taught when their teacher was someone who looked like them and could share similar experiences. Furthermore, his removal showed black parents and activists the kind of power they were capable of when properly organized and served as one of the earliest instances of civil rights organization for combating racism within education.

The African Free School inspired the New York Free School Society to establish low-cost schools in the city as alternatives to private schooling. Led by Mayor DeWitt Clinton, the Free School Society aimed to unite different educational schools under a single entity.<sup>20</sup> However, the Society lacked funding and actual school buildings. It was not able to build its first school until 1806, after it received subscriptions from a variety of donors, including Clinton.<sup>21</sup> The subscriptions amounted to \$6,501 and allowed the Society to build its first school only a year after fundraising.<sup>22</sup> Within days of opening, the school reported having 42 students.<sup>23</sup> Like the African Free School, the Society

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<sup>18</sup> Teachers vs. Parents. "The History of the School,"

<sup>19</sup> Teachers vs. Parents. "The History of the School,"

<sup>20</sup> "New York Free School Society, 1805,"

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/new-york-free-school-society-1805>.

<sup>21</sup> Palmer, A. Emerson. *The New York Public School: Being a History of Free Education in the City of New York*, 1905, 22-24. <https://archive.org/details/newyorkpublicsc00goog/page/n62/mode/2up>.

<sup>22</sup> Palmer, A. Emerson. *The New York Public School: Being a History of Free Education in the City of New York*. 23

<sup>23</sup> Palmer, A. Emerson. *The New York Public School: Being a History of Free Education in the City of New York*. 23

adopted the Lancasterian method of teaching, which enabled it to save hundreds of dollars on teachers by only employing one for sometimes hundreds of students.<sup>24</sup> In promoting education for the less fortunate, Mayor Clinton declared “here, no privileged orders - no hereditary nobility -- no established religion - no royal perogatives exist, to interpose barriers between the people, and to create distinct classifications in society.”<sup>25</sup> The idea of the Free School Society led to the creation of the State Common School Fund in 1806 by the New York State Legislature.<sup>26</sup> The importance of this fund was not lost on the Society, who noted that the creation of the fund was “one of the most important laws recorded in the annals of our Legislature... calculated to confer lasting benefits on the community.”<sup>27</sup> In trying to secure more funding, however, the Free School Society was forced to reconcile with the fact that it had to “unite all classes of [New York City’s] citizens’ by replacing education strictly for the poor with a policy of admitting children regardless of their background.”<sup>28</sup> As a result of its new policies, the school became “an instrument of social cohesion.”<sup>29</sup> The Free School Society soon merged with the African Free School and by 1853, formally became known as the Board of Education (BOE.) As a result, New York City’s education system merged students of various classes and races, setting precedents in race relations and education. In establishing the Free School

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<sup>24</sup> Palmer, A. Emerson. *The New York Public School: Being a History of Free Education in the City of New York*. 25

<sup>25</sup> McCarthy, Andy. “Class Act: Researching New York City Schools with Local History Collections,”

<sup>26</sup> Folts, James D. “History of the University of the State of New York and the State Education Department 1784-1996,” 1996. <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/edocs/education/sedhist.htm#free>.

<sup>27</sup> “New York Free School Society, 1805,”

<sup>28</sup> Cutler, William W. “The School’s As Refuge: The New York Public School Society’s Years of Decision, 1826-1832,” February 17, 1973. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED103552.pdf>. 9

<sup>29</sup> Cutler, William W. “The School’s As Refuge: The New York Public School Society’s Years of Decision. 9

Society, Clinton was able to successfully further the educational attainment of New York's poorest and most vulnerable by giving those students a space to learn, regardless of race or class.

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Waves of immigration crashed onto New York City throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with each wave flooding the school system with new children and presenting new challenges for the Board of Education. The first wave consisted mostly of Europeans and by the end of 1910, immigrants and first-generation Americans accounted for 75 percent of New York City's population, effectively reshaping the city's demographics.<sup>30</sup> New York's evolving ethnic makeup made equal education more important than ever. The wave of mostly European immigration prompted the BOE to find new means of educating children. Through the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the BOE created a special school that meant to prepare "to prepare immigrant children in English for admission to advanced grades in the public schools."<sup>31</sup> Started on May 21, 1899 by the Jewish Colonization Association, the Fund aimed to ease the challenges immigrants faced when arriving in the United States. One of the key components of the Fund was providing education for young immigrant children, regardless of their religion. It allowed that "immediately upon arrival the immigrant children are taught English in large, well-ventilated classrooms, by college graduates, who prepare them to enter the public

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<sup>30</sup> Cutler, William W. "The School's As Refuge: The New York Public School Society's Years of Decision." 9

<sup>31</sup> "IMMIGRATION SCHOOL WON'T BE ABOLISHED." *The New York Times*, March 15, 1910. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1910/03/15/104924776.html?pageNumber=18>.

schools.”<sup>32</sup> Besides providing education for young children, the fund also provided opportunities for adults to learn trades and farming.<sup>33</sup> Through these initiatives, the Fund was able to provide a stable foundation for a number of immigrants, regardless of age. Despite the steady stream of immigration that the City and Board of Education faced in the early 1900s, it was able to conform to its ever-changing population by securing funds and providing opportunities for those children to learn. It remained true to its mission statement of being “an instrument of social cohesion.”<sup>34</sup> The City’s population changed drastically beginning in the 1900s due to the influx of European migration. Despite the challenges in accommodating and educating immigrant children, the City responded quickly and with capable solutions. Unfortunately, its response was not replicated in the future by similar waves of migration, the only difference being people of color versus white people.

The Great Migration served as the second wave of migration that the City experienced, this time from blacks in the South who began to emerge in 1910. However, the City’s effort to provide support for its new immigrants differed when it came to immigrants of color. At the start of the 20th century, New York City’s black population stood at only 60,666 people, good for 1.8% of the city’s total population.<sup>35</sup> Black

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<sup>32</sup> “BARON DE HIRSCH FUND: 45 Broadway, New York City.” *The American Jewish Year Book* 1 (1899): 42-49. [www.jstor.org/stable/23600028](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23600028)

<sup>33</sup> “BARON DE HIRSCH FUND: 45 Broadway, New York City.” *The American Jewish Year Book* 1 42-49.

<sup>34</sup> Cutler, William W. “The School’s As Refuge: The New York Public School Society’s Years of Decision.” 9

<sup>35</sup> “New York - Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990,” <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/NYtab.pdf>.

migration from the South inflated this number to 458,444 by the beginning of 1940.<sup>36</sup> Unsurprisingly, the majority of these new migrants suffered from poverty. Black families had been amongst the hardest hit during the Great Depression, with roughly half of all Black Americans jobless and violence re-emerging in the South.<sup>37</sup> The desperation felt by blacks to leave the south is best described by scholar Emmett J. Scott, who writes “[Blacks] left as though they were fleeing some curse. They were willing to make almost any sacrifice to obtain a railroad ticket, and they left with the intention of staying.”<sup>38</sup> The violence that reemerged in the south at the turn of the century resulted in unspeakable tragedies such as the burning of eighteen-year-old teen Jesse Washington.<sup>39</sup> His burning was attended by thousands of spectators, all of whom were white and all of who yearned to get a better viewing position. Washington’s burning served as only one case of racial violence during a time where “someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929,” resulting in “all blacks [living] with the reality that no black individual was completely safe from lynching.”<sup>40</sup> The harrowing reality that blacks in the South forced them to start migrating north in order to find salvation from the destruction of Jim Crow.

Coupled with the start of World War II, black migration to New York City began in earnest and congregated especially so in Harlem. The United States’ entry into the war

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<sup>36</sup> “New York - Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990,”

<sup>37</sup> “Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s,”

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwii/race/>.

<sup>38</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*. Vintage Books ed. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2011. 8

<sup>39</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*. 39

<sup>40</sup> Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*. 39



created new job opportunities in factories for black men and women alike. Factory work for the City's newest residents consisted of working 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week.<sup>41</sup> Workers were paid roughly \$25 for a week's worth of work.<sup>42</sup> Despite the low payment, it was a drastic increase from the typical 75 cents workers made in the South working on farms.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, although factory jobs were often low-paying, they served as an entryway into the city.<sup>44</sup> Despite only covering three square miles, Harlem became home to "nearly 175,000 African Americans, giving the neighborhood the largest concentration of black people in the world."<sup>45</sup> The influx of black residents in Harlem catalyzed the Harlem Renaissance. However, actions taken by the city government proved that their hope for a better life in the north was misplaced and would not be easily given to them.

New York City and the Board of Education did well initially in accommodating the needs of its immigrants. Although the City had received support from funds such as the Baron de Hirsch Fund, it also showed an inclination to try and support its newest residents. However, as blacks from the south began to migrate north, the City's tone shifted and became less helpful. Suddenly, the City began to struggle in accommodating its new migrants in all aspects of their lives, but especially so with education. In the decades to follow, as schools in low-income, minority neighborhoods became

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<sup>41</sup> Halpern, Monica. *Moving North: African Americans and the Great Migration, 1915-1930*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2006. <https://archive.org/details/movingnorthafric0000halp>. 24

<sup>42</sup> Halpern, Monica. *Moving North: African Americans and the Great Migration, 1915-1930*. 24

<sup>43</sup> Halpern, Monica. *Moving North: African Americans and the Great Migration, 1915-1930*. 24

<sup>44</sup> Halpern, Monica. *Moving North: African Americans and the Great Migration, 1915-1930*. 24

<sup>45</sup> "A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance," <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance>.

increasingly segregated, the City's dilatory effort to integrate them, or at least provide equal resources, would result in backlash from parents and civil rights activists.

## The Deterioration of Education in New York from 1940-1960

Following the wave of European immigration, the City's public school system received praise across the country. Other states took note of how New York had managed to successfully avoid overburden its public school system and as a result, looked to it in hopes of replicating its success.<sup>46</sup> Although there were hundreds of thousands of black migrants who made New York their home during the early 1900s, New York City's population at the beginning of the 1940s remained predominantly white. The City held "fewer than 500,000 non-whites in a city of more than 7.4 million (less than 7% of the population.)"<sup>47</sup> However, as black migration into the City rapidly increased during the 1940s, the City and its school system started to crack under the pressure of maintaining so many new students. School structures began to decay and children of color rarely obtained the resources they needed to succeed. Schools in communities of color commonly employed racist, white teachers who stunted the academic growth of their students. The direction that the public school system was heading in was a far cry from the progress it made regarding race relations in the previous decade. Despite the rotting school system, black activists had no one to turn to in the Board of Education. The BOE

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<sup>46</sup> Ravitch, Diane. *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*. New York: Basic Books, 1988. 238

<sup>47</sup> "New York from the 1940s to Now,"

<https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Centers-and-Institutes/Center-for-Urban-Research/CUNY-Mapping-Service/Projects/New-York-from-the-1940s-to-now>.

lacked any minority members and as a result, black activists turned to other people and groups in hopes of fighting against the discrimination that was slowly embedding itself into the public school system. The 1940s and 1950s signalled decades where New York's public school system became more discriminant in its policies, but also planted the seeds for black activism in the public education sector.

Throughout World War II, the Board of Education made strides in bridging the racial divide that existed between black parents and educators. In 1938 the BOE put forth a plan that would enable white teachers from other parts of the city to observe what was different from schools in Harlem (the city's predominantly black neighborhood) as opposed to their own.<sup>48</sup> James Marshall, president of the BOE at the time, founded the program with the purpose of giving teachers from those same Harlem schools a space to learn about the kind of lives their pupils faced outside of the classroom, as well as an opportunity to voice their own opinions and recommendations. The program would have "representatives from each of the Harlem schools, including teachers and supervisors, meet once a week with leading social, religious, and welfare leaders to discuss the various problems that are peculiar to Harlem and analyze the needs of the neighborhood."

<sup>49</sup> The participants discussed problems and topics such as "housing, recreation, juvenile delinquency, economic condition, and racial prejudice."<sup>50</sup> Providing a forum for discussion of these issues had benefits not just for teachers and students, but parents and influential neighborhood figures as well.

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<sup>48</sup> "TEACHERS TO STUDY HARLEM PROBLEMS." *The New York Times*, October 25, 1938. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1938/10/05/98196719.html?pageNumber=25>.

<sup>49</sup> "TEACHERS TO STUDY HARLEM PROBLEMS."

<sup>50</sup> "TEACHERS TO STUDY HARLEM PROBLEMS."

In 1939, the Board of Education introduced tolerance learning and teaching in another effort to address the racial tensions in schools. Deemed a “huge city experiment [trying] to check the spread of foreign bigotry,” it began as an effort to educate 1,200,000 students and 40,000 teachers “tolerance, understanding, and good-will.”<sup>51</sup> The experiment focused on students in particular, due to the rise in racist incidents that had been recorded across the school system, including “ugly words [that] scrawled on the walls, vicious literature [that] was left in teachers’ mail boxes.”<sup>52</sup> As a result of these incidents, the city installed the program where “bi-monthly exercises [were] held to emphasize the American traditions of democracy, mutual respect for minority groups and a wholesome attitude toward fellow citizens regardless of race, color or creed.”<sup>53</sup> The BOE also put out a “laboratory course in intercultural education” intended for teachers and principals.<sup>54</sup> The laboratory course was meant to invalidate conjectures made by a number of teachers and principals across the city’s school system. It also sought to teach educators “what part they can play in bringing sympathetic and desirable attitudes into the classroom. Popular misconceptions about race will be ‘exposed’ to tolerance situations through assemblies and English classes by motion pictures, radio and other educational means.”<sup>55</sup> The program did not focus specifically on one race, religion or nationality, but rather encompassed a host of them such as Black, Italian, Spanish, and Jewish cultures. It featured programs such as hosting a Jewish rabbi, holding a performance by a black

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<sup>51</sup> Fine, Benjamin. “Schools Fight Racial Hatred.” *The New York Times*, February 12, 1939. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1939/02/12/95757227.html?pageNumber=58>.

<sup>52</sup> Fine, Benjamin. “Schools Fight Racial Hatred.”

<sup>53</sup> Fine, Benjamin. “Schools Fight Racial Hatred.”

<sup>54</sup> Fine, Benjamin. “Schools Fight Racial Hatred.”

<sup>55</sup> Fine, Benjamin. “Schools Fight Racial Hatred.”

artist, and featuring a film about Palestine and its history.<sup>56</sup> Program administrators encouraged parents to join students and educators in learning about racial misrepresentations and tolerance.<sup>57</sup> The efforts made on behalf of the BOE show the kind of positive changes that it underwent towards the end of 1930s. The efforts showed a public school system that was willing to learn and understand the differences that made the City so unique.

The widespread praise the school system received in the late 1930s subsequently had detrimental effects. According to Diane Ravitch, the school board became complacent and believed its success to be due to “the power of modern educational thinking,” not the funds that it had received or the lack of migration the City had experienced.<sup>58</sup> As a result, the City’s school system became more centralized, leading to a lack of responsiveness in communities as well as a hierarchical relationship between teachers and administrators.<sup>59</sup> The school system’s success also caused communication to erode on all levels of the school system. This erosion of communication held negative implications for communities of color in future years.

Issues such as lack of community input and the decline of resources and funding, began to arise within the school system and pertained primarily to blacks and Hispanics. The lack of minority representation on the BOE exacerbated the problems. For many black activists, it evoked feelings of “taxation without representation.”<sup>60</sup> Many people

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<sup>56</sup> Fine, Benjamin. “Schools Fight Racial Hatred.”

<sup>57</sup> Fine, Benjamin. “Schools Fight Racial Hatred.”

<sup>58</sup> Ravitch, Diane. *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*. 238

<sup>59</sup> Ravitch, Diane. *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*. 239

<sup>60</sup> “History of Negroes on Education Board Told.” *New York Amsterdam News* (1943-1961), Dec 10, 1949, City edition.

believed that the lack of representation on the school board contributed to “antiquated school buildings, uncovered classes, discriminatory zoning practices and prejudiced treatment of Negroes and other minorities in text and library books.”<sup>61</sup> Although black residents sought representation on the Board of Education in 1930, the demand went unrealized for more than thirty years.

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In spite of having no advocates on the board, black residents were able to rely on others such as Annie Stein and the Teachers’ Union to fight for their causes throughout the 1940s and 1950s. The Teachers Union played an important, though often overlooked role, in the fight against racial discrimination within the school system. Authors Ansley Erickson and Ernest Morrell state that the Union was established in 1916 by a group of white teachers in order to fight for decent salaries and academic freedom.<sup>62</sup> It eventually grew to six thousand members, most, if not all, who were white, which was in part due to the lack of black teachers in New York public schools. These six thousand members represented close to 1/7th of the teaching force in the city.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the Teachers’ Union, according to Clarence Taylor, “called for organizing workers at all levels, including part-time, and unemployed teachers, towards building a strong working

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<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/225908441?accountid=10141>.

<sup>61</sup> “History of Negroes on Education Board Told.” New York Amsterdam News

<sup>62</sup> Erickson, Ansley T., and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.  
<https://harlemeducationhistory.library.columbia.edu/book/chapters/06/>.

<sup>63</sup> Erickson, Ansley T., and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community*. Ch.6.

class. This meant eliminating walls, such as racism, that divided the class.”<sup>64</sup> According to Taylor, this kind of bridging across racial divisions led the Teachers’ Union to spearhead, “a major campaign to end institutional racism in the educational system... Members of the [Teachers’ Union] contended that structural factors robbed Black children of a decent education.”<sup>65</sup> The Teachers’ Union were not alone in their efforts to fight racism within the educational system, but they stood out due to their ability to form meaningful relationships with communities of color and civil rights activists and help them fight for educational equality. It was this relationship that appears to have resulted in the most progress for these same Black and Latinx communities. Armed with a group of teachers across the city, these underprivileged, and often misrepresented, communities were able to fight for what the administrators had robbed their children of: renovated and new school buildings, undiscriminate texts, and better resources for students.<sup>66</sup> These were causes that had been difficult for marginalized communities to fight for in the past. The Teachers’ Union served as a beacon of hope for these communities, but unfortunately, it was a beacon that quickly came under fire for the fighting for equality.

The support that the Teachers’ Union provided Black and Latinx communities was unique. Other unions, such as the Teachers Guild, stood as stark opposites when it came to educational equality. The Guild was founded in 1935 by former members of the Teachers’ Union who believed the Union had veered too far left and was becoming

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<sup>64</sup> Erickson, Ansley T., and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community* Ch.6.

<sup>65</sup> Erickson, Ansley T., and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community* Ch.6.

<sup>66</sup> Erickson, Ansley T., and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community* Ch.6.

increasingly communist in its views. Despite the difference in ideological beliefs, the Guild, like the Union, was composed of white members. Yet the Teachers Guild “did not build strong alliances with parents of color and civic organizations in Harlem and other black communities in New York.”<sup>67</sup> Whereas the Teachers’ Union looked to help end discrimination in the classroom, the Teachers Guild feigned ignorance. It portrayed racial incidents that occurred in predominantly black schools as being blown out of proportion.<sup>68</sup> As a result, the Guild further differentiated itself from the Union by putting the interest of educators first and the interests of the community second.

The Teachers Guild did not simply rise to take over the Teachers’ Union out of nowhere. It had support from the very same Board of Education that had once installed initiatives to combat racism inside the school system. In particular, the BOE used anti-communist rhetoric as a valid reason to go after the Teachers’ Union, releasing propaganda that targeted the Teachers Union and lifted up the Teachers Guild. This campaign contributed to a drop in community relations between educators and students and their parents and thwarted much of the progress on race relations in the classroom the Teachers’ Union had created. These issues became magnified in the 1950s and resulted in the ousting of over 400 teachers.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, the BOE adopted the Timone Resolution in 1950, “which banned the [Teachers’ Union] from operating in the schools.”<sup>70</sup> Apart

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<sup>67</sup> Erickson, Ansley T., and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community* Ch.6.

<sup>68</sup> Erickson, Ansley T., and Ernest Morrell, eds. *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community* Ch.6.

<sup>69</sup> “Clarence Taylor’s History of the Teachers Union,”  
[http://dreamersandfighters.com/history/clarence\\_taylor\\_history.aspx](http://dreamersandfighters.com/history/clarence_taylor_history.aspx).

<sup>70</sup> “Clarence Taylor’s History of the Teachers Union,”



from displacing hundreds of teachers, the BOE also revoked one of the few, if not only, connections that communities of color had to education officials.

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The School Board claimed to be ahead of the curve when it came to *Brown v. Board of Education* and race relations within the classroom. Board leaders released a statement in 1954, stating that “It is now the clearly reiterated policy and program of the Board of Education of the City of New York to devise and put into operation a plan which will prevent the further development of such [segregated] schools and would integrate the existing ones as quickly as possible.”<sup>71</sup> The reality proved to be the opposite. At the time of *Brown*, there were 52 schools where all the students were either Black or Puerto Rican.<sup>72</sup> In spite of the work the Teachers’ Union had done in communities of color, their extermination by the BOE left a void in those communities.

Following the Union’s ousting, Annie Stein, a white woman from New York, emerged as one of the more prominent advocates of equal education and played a key role in fighting for full integration in the 1950s. Born in 1913 to a working-class family, Stein became initially involved with the Youth Communist Party after noting the “social and economic injustices of capitalism and the logic of a socialist society.”<sup>73</sup> Annie quickly became fixated with the idea of progressive reform and moved to Washington D.C. where she “helped organize the lowest paid women workers... including laundry,

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<sup>71</sup> “Annie Stein Papers, 1954-1993,”

[http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd\\_6909494/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_6909494/).

<sup>72</sup> “Annie Stein Papers, 1954-1993.”

<sup>73</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. The Columbia History of Urban Life. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 55

domestic, hotel, and restaurant workers.”<sup>74</sup> Stein’s ability to organize others quickly grew and “she learned how to lead nonviolent protests and build alliances.”<sup>75</sup> After moving to Brooklyn, Stein joined the Parent-Teacher Association, where she was able to soon become president and would lead the fight for school integration.<sup>76</sup> Stein, along with other activists, was able to organize parents to fight the discriminatory actions of the Board of Education that they failed to mention in their statement. Stein and her group took actions such as “demanding mass transfers, bussing, [and] open enrollment.”<sup>77</sup> The efforts on behalf of the civil rights activists culminated in the construction of 244 new schools meant to combat segregation. In spite of the new buildings, segregation persisted, with 57% being completely segregated when they first opened their doors.<sup>78</sup> Through zoning, the BOE ensured that although it made efforts to appease civil rights activists, it concurrently set barriers in motion that would prevent the system from actually conforming to the demands of the activists.

Perhaps the most crucial person in the fight for integration was a reverend from Brooklyn named Milton A. Galamison. The school boycott would not have come to fruition without the guidance of Rev. Galamison who throughout his life simultaneously served as both a preacher and prominent civil rights leader. Galamison was born into a time where black Americans were trying to find their footing amidst one of the more

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<sup>74</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 56

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 56

<sup>76</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 57

<sup>77</sup> “Annie Stein Papers, 1954-1993”

<sup>78</sup> “Annie Stein Papers, 1954-1993”

difficult economic situations, that is the Great Depression. Galamison was born on March 25, 1923 and grew up in Philadelphia when Philadelphia's black population began to boom, much in the same way New York had experienced.<sup>79</sup> From 1900 to 1920, the black population in Philadelphia had more than doubled from 62,600 to 134,200.<sup>80</sup> By the end of the 1920s, Philadelphia's black population stood at 250,880, making up 13% of Philadelphia's population. This new wave of black migration coupled with the effects of the Great Depression contributed to severe racial discrimination in the city across all kinds of sectors, including education.

The racism Galamison encountered in his education prompted him to strive to make a difference as an adult. Growing up in poverty did not impact Galamison's ability to receive an education and was in large part thanks to his grandmother, Nellie. While Galamison was growing up, Nellie always made sure books were available to read and propelled Milton to seek success in school.<sup>81</sup> Despite the family's efforts to educate Galamison to the highest degree, the racism he experienced in the classroom made it difficult for him to excel. In one memorable incident, after he peed himself, his teacher claimed it occurred due to racial inferiority, stating that "a white child wouldn't do that!"

<sup>82</sup> Racial incidents extended into Galamison's high school experience, where school administrators placed him and other black students in a vocational program, as opposed

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<sup>79</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 9

<sup>80</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 9

<sup>81</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 17

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 18

to white students who had the option to enroll in an academic program.<sup>83</sup> The predetermined placement and lack of choice for black students enraged him. As Galamison's biographer, Clarence Taylor, notes, "He was a rebel by aspiring to rise in a by graduating from high school in Philadelphia, he demonstrated his success in a society where few blacks graduated."<sup>84</sup> Galamison's experience in education as a child and teen would go on to shape his greater life philosophy regarding race and education. It would propel him to become leader of the school boycott that would serve as a defining moment in his life.

Galamison's position as reverend of Siloam Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn provided him a way to get involved with the black communities of New York and advance his agenda on race and education. The church was an influential one, which had a long tradition of activist ministers and simultaneously "offered Galamison a platform for his future involvement in improving education for minority children in public schools."<sup>85</sup> Galamison's relationship with the church proved to work in two ways. Although the church elevated Galamison's profile, he also propelled great change and growth in the church. According to the *New Amsterdam News*, Galamison installed "a week-day program which serves 7,000 older persons annually, operates a remedial program for 180 youth in 12 clubs, and [has] five choirs."<sup>86</sup> These programs cemented his

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<sup>83</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 19

<sup>84</sup> Taylor, Clarence. *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. 39

<sup>85</sup> Zenz, Cassandra. "MILTON A. GALAMISON (1923-1988)," September 11, 2010. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/galamison-milton-1923-1988/>.

<sup>86</sup> Nall, Al. "Church to Honor Rev. Galamison." *New York Amsterdam News* (1943-1961), Oct 04, 1958, City edition.

position as someone trustworthy, caring, and reliable in the community, which would prove crucial for his later activism around educational equity.

Galamison's interest in issues of public education in New York stemmed from his involvement with the Parents' Workshop for Equality. His wife, Gladys, served as a kindergarten teacher in Brownsville, where she was able to witness the deteriorating conditions of the school as its population changed from Italian and Jewish to Black and Hispanic.<sup>87</sup> The problem of educational inequity for black children prompted Galamison to create the Parents' Workshop for Equality in 1959.<sup>88</sup> He became its president, and according to "[provided] much of its ideological direction throughout its existence."<sup>89</sup> The Workshop set as its goals "to work for the integration of the schools of New York; [to work] for full and equal opportunity for learning for all the children of our city; to end all school discrimination against Negro and Puerto Ricans children; and to preserve, improve and expand our free and democratic public school system."<sup>90</sup> These values and goals aligned with much of what Rev. Galamison had preached for most of his life. The Workshop existed as a physical manifestation of Galamison's goals and ideas and served as a way to assemble people who thought similarly.

Reverend Galamison's position as Chairman of the citywide Civil Rights Committee also provided him with important influence and connections. This committee

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<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/225547422?accountid=10141>.

<sup>87</sup> Jones, Theodore. "Threats and Insults Plaguing Mrs. Galamison." *The New York Times*, February 15, 1964. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1964/02/15/97380115.html?pageNumber=24>.

<sup>88</sup> Jones, Theodore. "Threats and Insults Plaguing Mrs. Galamison."

<sup>89</sup> Hinton, Elizabeth Kai, and Manning Marable, eds. *The New Black History: Revisiting the Second Reconstruction*. 1st ed. The Critical Black Studies Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 36

<sup>90</sup> Hinton, Elizabeth Kai, and Manning Marable, eds. *The New Black History: Revisiting the Second Reconstruction*. 36

was in charge of most other groups across the city, including CORE, NAACP, Urban League, Harlem Parents' Committee, and Parents' Action Committee, as well as the Parents' Workshop.<sup>91</sup> Being Chairman of the Civil Rights Committee gave Rev. Galamison close to full control of the civil rights movement in New York City during the 1960s and allowed him to dictate his vision to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people. As a result of this consolidated power, it was Galamison's chief organization, the Parents' Workshop for Equality, that led the charge for the February 1964 boycott, which they named the New York City Freedom Day Boycott.

Advocates such as Rev. Galamison, Annie Stein, and the Teachers' Union were able to provide relief and support for black children and their families in response to the poor conditions they faced in the classrooms. However, poor conditions such as overcrowding and lack of resources and funding were not the sole reasons that led to the city-wide boycott on February 3, 1964. The City had put up a facade in years prior, presenting its education system as one that was actively working to repair race relations in the classroom through a variety of means when the reality was the opposite. Using groups such as the Teachers Guild allowed the City to push back against desegregation movements, in particular, against the Teachers' Union. The persistence of the racial segregation suggest that the School Board was not wholly invested in the education of people of color and its limited efforts were superficial forms of public relations. The

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<sup>91</sup> "Parents Mobilize for School Boycott." New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993), Nov 23, 1963. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226757057?accountid=10141>.

February 3rd boycott represented the culmination of repeated lack of regard for students of color across a number of schools over numerous decades.

## Freedom Day: 1964

The 1964 New York boycott turned into one of, if not the largest civil rights demonstration of all time thanks to the organized efforts on behalf of civil rights activists. The boycott resulted in 464,361 students, or 44.8% of the total school population, skipping class.<sup>92</sup> Led by Reverend Milton Galamison, a prominent, local civil rights leader, the boycott and protest aimed to fight segregation in the City's public school system. In the years leading up to the 1964 protest, the City's Board of Education had numerous attempts to integrate students of color and repair race relations within schools. However, the BOE instead opted to install initiatives that intentionally harmed communities of color and their schools. This deceptiveness and pent up frustration from minority families and civil rights organizations led them to join the boycott. The school boycott of February 3rd, 1964 was the product of grassroots efforts from civil rights leaders and activists across the city and served as the ultimate example of what proper organization amongst black families and civil rights organizations could achieve.

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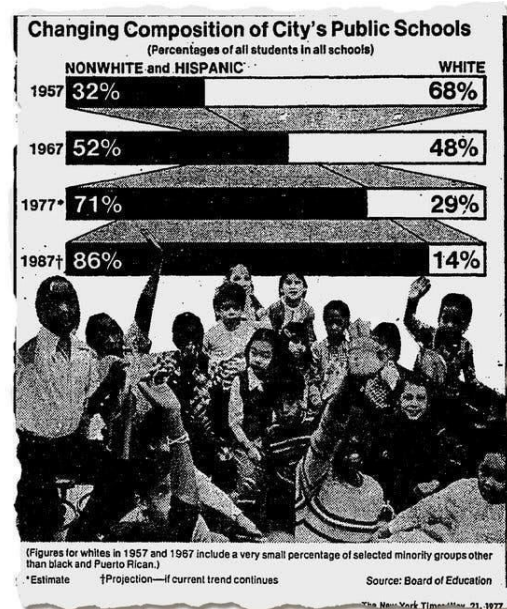
The boycott sought to challenge the conditions that officials had allowed to exist and fester in schools and classrooms in predominantly poor and black/Puerto Rican

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<sup>92</sup> Buder, Leonard. "BOYCOTT CRIPPLES CITY SCHOOLS; ABSENCES 360,000 ABOVE NORMAL; NEGROES AND PUERTO RICANS UNITE: PICKETS PEACEFUL INTEGRATION PROTEST IS HAILED AS SUCCESS BY ITS LEADERS SCHOOL BOYCOTT KEEPS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF CITY PUPILS AWAY FROM CLASSES PICKETING IS CALM IN RACIAL PROTEST 2,600 MARCHERS SHOW UP AT BUILDINGS--DONOVAN IS CRITICAL OF LEADERS." New York Times (1923-Current File), Feb 04, 1964.  
<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/115663250?accountid=10141>.



neighborhoods. New York City saw a boom in black migration from the South throughout the latter end of the 1950s. The urban migration resulted in the number of students in the New York City public school system doubling, but despite this wave of new students, most were concentrated in low-income areas, reinforcing the segregation that was already in place. In 1957, the New York City public schools 68% white and 32% students of color. 10 years later, students of color outnumbered white students, 52% to 48%. 10 years later, students of color outnumbered white students, 71% to 29%. 10 years later, students of color outnumbered white students, 86% to 14%.



*The New York Times*

As the graphic shows, the decades that would follow would continue to show even greater growth in ethnic student populations. However, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when schools saw the wave of predominantly southern, black migrants, they failed to accommodate the accompanying children. The new, predominantly black students attended what was known at the time as “ghetto schools,” that often suffered from being

“overcrowded, poorly maintained, and often staffed by teachers who had ‘washed out’ elsewhere in the [school] system”<sup>93</sup> Placing these new migrant students exacerbated the issues that already existed in these “ghetto schools.” The wave of black migration in the 1950s and 60s provided an opportunity for the BOE to begin integration by placing the migrant black children in predominantly white schools. Placing the migrant black students in already segregated schools reinforced the notion that the BOE actively encouraged segregation. The lack of resources and quality teachers was one indication of the lack of concern school administrators had toward the students in these areas. Inevitably, students suffered from the lackluster teaching and rustic facilities. Although black children made up 30% of the public school system, only 2.3% of them were able to earn their academic diploma.<sup>94</sup> The damage was not concentrated to a certain area of the City, but rather, to a certain race. 85% of sixth-graders in Harlem schools were two or more grade levels behind in their reading level.<sup>95</sup> A study done at the time, titled *Youth in the Ghetto*, reported that “the IQs of Harlem elementary school pupils... actually declined between the third and sixth grades.”<sup>96</sup> Crossing the Brooklyn Bridge did not garner better results; “At Ocean Hill-Brownsville’s JHS 271, 75% of the students were classified as not possessing the ‘minimum competence’ to learn effectively, twice the city

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<sup>93</sup> Podair, Jerald E. *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2002. [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npzqf](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npzqf). 154

<sup>94</sup> Podair, Jerald E. *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*. 154

<sup>95</sup> Podair, Jerald E. *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*. 154

<sup>96</sup> Podair, Jerald E. *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*. 154

average.”<sup>97</sup> Black parents and civil rights activists were right to ask for integration.

Evidently, there existed a large gap in education between black and white children that was the culmination of neglect from the BOE and discriminatory practices.

Parents and civil rights leaders were frustrated with the Board of Education for consistently neglecting and delaying integration plans. After lobbying the Board for at least an integration plan numerous times, activists were agitated to the point where they consulted Bayard Rustin, who headed the March on Washington, to help direct their idea for a boycott.<sup>98</sup> Rustin’s name added legitimacy not only to the idea of the boycott, but to New York’s civil rights movement as a whole. Rustin recognized that the national Civil Rights Movement was at an “impasse,” and “retrogressing in many cities.”<sup>99</sup> Rustin recognized that the boycott would be an opportunity to show the power of the Civil Rights Movement not just in New York, but the country.

Although Rev. Galamison and Bayard Rustin were the faces of the Freedom Day movement, the decision to have the boycott ultimately fell in the hands of the Workshop members. According to the *New York Amsterdam News*, Workshop members voted to move ahead with the boycott on November 14, 1963.<sup>100</sup> By voting to continue with the boycott, the Parents’ Workshop broadcasted to those in charge of the City’s education system that it was not satisfied with efforts to desegregate schools. In the immediate, it

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<sup>97</sup> Podair, Jerald E. *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis*. 154

<sup>98</sup> “New York School Boycott,” [http://crdl.usg.edu/events/ny\\_school\\_boycott/](http://crdl.usg.edu/events/ny_school_boycott/).

<sup>99</sup> Handler, M.S. “Rustin Sees Losses.” *The New York Times*, December 2, 1963. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/12/02/89980339.html?pageNumber=1>.

<sup>100</sup> “Parents Mobilize for School Boycott.” *New York Amsterdam News*

was in reaction to a free transfer proposal that had been floated by the BOE.<sup>101</sup> The proposal would have allowed “more active parents to take their children out of ghetto schools,” without penalty and as a result, serve as an example of proactive segregation.<sup>102</sup> Following the vote, members began to work on the planning phase of the boycott. First, they worked on selecting a date recognizing it would help them and their planned boycott to be taken more seriously. The planned date ended up being February 3, 1964. The date’s proximity to the new year allowed civil rights groups to set an early tone for how the remainder of the year would go, depending on if the BOE put out an acceptable plan or not. Previously, the groups had simply agreed to hold the boycott at some point in 1964. Aside from picking a date, activists also staged a picket and “[flooded] the Board’s switchboard with telephone calls.”<sup>103</sup> These acts were not done out of malice to the BOE, but instead were an effort meant to push authorities to actually acknowledge what parents and their children in these communities of color were living on a day-to-day basis inside the classrooms. The proactive engagement on behalf of Civil Rights groups helped show the City and its constituents that the anger and passion felt behind the integration issue was real and not just an empty threat. In spite of these tactics, the City refused to acknowledge the larger issue at hand and continued to be stuck in its old ways.

In January, Civil Rights groups continued to lobby the City and the BOE to listen to its qualms, only to fall on deaf ears. The City government was especially resistant to

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<sup>101</sup> "Parents Mobilize for School Boycott." New York Amsterdam News

<sup>102</sup> "Parents Mobilize for School Boycott." New York Amsterdam News

<sup>103</sup> "School Boycott Set for Feb. 3, Picket Bd. Mon.: Reject Gross' Report." New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993), Dec 14, 1963.

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226776566?accountid=10141>.

listening to the activists. Despite the looming boycott, Mayor Robert F. Wagner shut down a meeting with civil rights organizations. A spokesman for Wagner stated that “there was no point in the meeting since the Board of Education had not yet announced its school integration plan.”<sup>104</sup> While true, it is undeniable that the meeting with the mayor would have been a major step forward in the civil rights’ groups mission to integrate the schools. It would have shown that the city’s top official was willing to listen and acknowledge the struggle for educational equality. The movement did secure backing from other major groups, such as the Metropolitan Conference of Civil Rights Organizations and the Lower East Side Neighborhoods Association. The added support further bolstered the boycott’s image and legitimacy, just days before the event.

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The Protest began on a frigid, blistery morning on Monday, February 3rd, 1964. It proved to be the perfect day for students to stay home, but organizers worried that the weather would prevent turnout for the strike. The opposite proved true. According to the New York Times, picketers peacefully lined up 300 of the City’s 860 public schools, hoping to spread their gospel regarding inequality in the classroom.<sup>105</sup> The protesters expressed their frustration through indignant signs and proclamations. Among the chants that they proudly proclaimed were “Jim Crow Must Go,” as well as, “We Shall

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<sup>104</sup> Buder, Leonard. "SCHOOL BOYCOTT GAINING SUPPORT: 2 MORE GROUPS ENDORSE PLANS FOR A PROTEST ON FEB. 3." New York Times (1923-Current File), Jan 23, 1964. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/115581579?accountid=10141>.

<sup>105</sup> Buder, Leonard. "BOYCOTT CRIPPLES CITY SCHOOLS; ABSENCES 360,000 ABOVE NORMAL; NEGROES AND PUERTO RICANS UNITE: PICKETS PEACEFUL INTEGRATION PROTEST IS HAILED AS SUCCESS BY ITS LEADERS SCHOOL BOYCOTT KEEPS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF CITY PUPILS AWAY FROM CLASSES PICKETING IS CALM IN RACIAL PROTEST 2,600 MARCHERS SHOW UP AT BUILDINGS--DONOVAN IS CRITICAL OF LEADERS."

Overcome.”<sup>106</sup> These chants were reminiscent of earlier Civil Rights Movements and placed the boycott’s profile on par with efforts such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington. In addition to the chants, protesters and picketers marched with signs that vocalized their grievances. Signs reflected the groups thinking, with slogans such as “Fight Jim Crow, Boycott Schools,” as well as, “Integration Means Better Schools For All.”<sup>107</sup> The protesters also distributed pamphlets and leaflets which provided more in depth information about the issue at hand. Additionally, the protesters had signs and literature written in several languages, including Spanish. The language diversity showed that the issue of racial inequality in public education was not just limited to black children and their parents; Puerto Ricans especially confronted harsh discrimination in the City’s schools. Because the Board of Education had frequently targeted poor communities that predominantly housed people of color, the Chicago Defender reported that “the boycott appeared to be most effective in schools with heavy Negro and Puerto Rican enrollments, especially in Harlem and the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.”<sup>108</sup> The high turnout in these neighborhoods came as a direct result of the neglect the BOE had given their schools and students. The turnout also symbolized

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<sup>106</sup> Buder, Leonard. "BOYCOTT CRIPPLES CITY SCHOOLS; ABSENCES 360,000 ABOVE NORMAL; NEGROES AND PUERTO RICANS UNITE: PICKETS PEACEFUL INTEGRATION PROTEST IS HAILED AS SUCCESS BY ITS LEADERS SCHOOL BOYCOTT KEEPS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF CITY PUPILS AWAY FROM CLASSES PICKETING IS CALM IN RACIAL PROTEST 2,600 MARCHERS SHOW UP AT BUILDINGS--DONOVAN IS CRITICAL OF LEADERS."

<sup>107</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. "Segregation Has Been the Story of New York City's Schools for 50 Years." *The New York Times*, March 26, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/nyregion/school-segregation-new-york.html>.

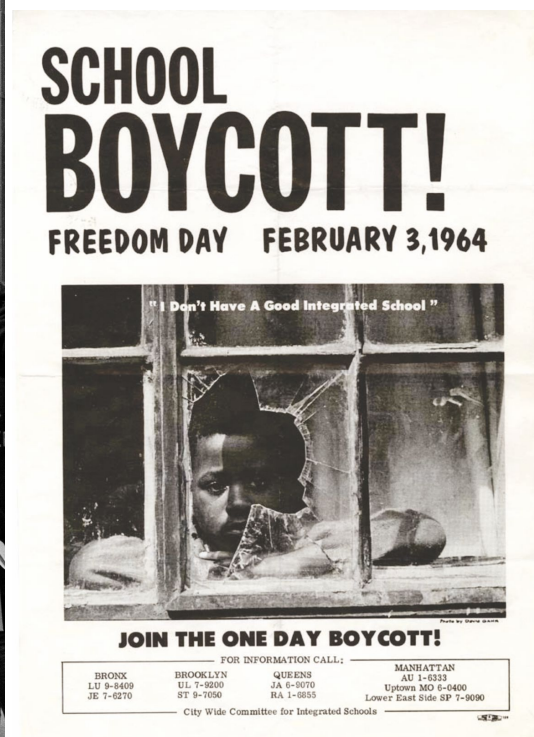
<sup>108</sup> "N. Y. Boycott Huge Success!: Nearly Half A Million Students Stay at Home." *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition) (1960-1973), Feb 04, 1964.

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/494025573?accountid=10141>.

camaraderie between blacks and Puerto Ricans. In fact, reporters at the time called it “the greatest demonstration ever of Negro and Puerto Rican unity.”<sup>109</sup> Although the circumstances that had led to this kind of unity were not the best, they were necessary. Without this unity, the boycott would not have had such a strong turnout and been considered a success.

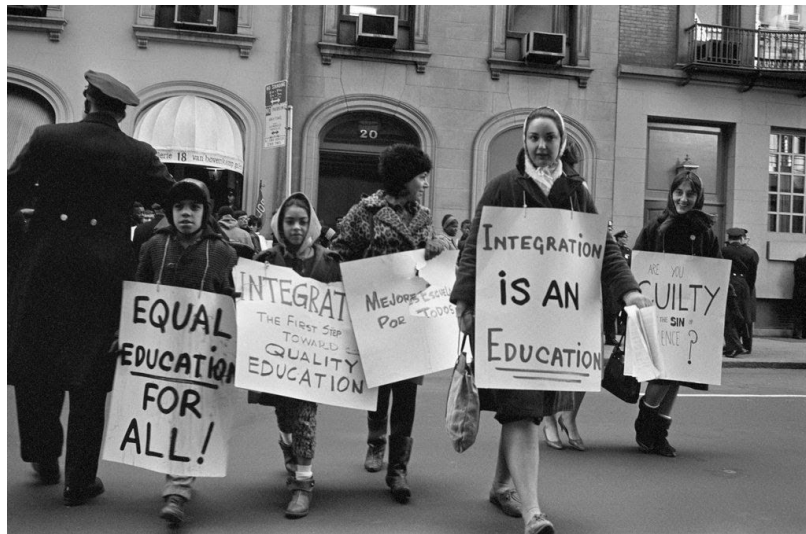


*Eddie Hausner/The New York Times*



*Queens College Civil Rights Archive*

<sup>109</sup> "N. Y. Boycott Huge Success!: Nearly Half A Million Students Stay at Home." Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)



*Eddie Hausner/The New York Times*

The lack of incidents with police and counterprotesters also served as a positive sign for the boycott. As reported in the *New York Times*, “pickets were courteous and disciplined. The police were equally polite, and there was a minimum of friction between the two groups.”<sup>110</sup> The lack of troubling incidents was crucial to the group and event’s success because anything less and the protesters would have been surely labelled as rioters or people intent on causing trouble and disturbing the peace. The lack of violence further legitimized the picket’s mission and provided the civil rights groups who had organized the event a new level of credibility. It was a far cry from the injuries that BOE leaders had predicted would rise out of the protests. In particular, when children and parents alike protested at the Brooklyn BOE office, seldom incidents were reported, with “the absence

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<sup>110</sup> Buder, Leonard. “BOYCOTT CRIPPLES CITY SCHOOLS; ABSENCES 360,000 ABOVE NORMAL; NEGROES AND PUERTO RICANS UNITE: PICKETS PEACEFUL INTEGRATION PROTEST IS HAILED AS SUCCESS BY ITS LEADERS SCHOOL BOYCOTT KEEPS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF CITY PUPILS AWAY FROM CLASSES PICKETING IS CALM IN RACIAL PROTEST 2,600 MARCHERS SHOW UP AT BUILDINGS--DONOVAN IS CRITICAL OF LEADERS.”



of disorder delight[ing] civil rights leaders.”<sup>111</sup> The lack of incidents was surely due in part to the heavy presence of children, most of whom opted to protest by “singing, cheering... [and acting] as though they were attending an immense outdoors class in civics.”<sup>112</sup> Perhaps the greatest amount of confrontation from the crowd came when the president of the Board of Education, James B. Donovan, looked down from the Brooklyn Board of Education building onto the gathered crowd. Upon revealing himself, protestors “set up a loud hoot,” but ultimately this hoot was as hostile as the crowd would get. The lack of hostility throughout the day was a promising sign that things could get done without the violence and bloodshed.

Apart from organizing the actual protest and picketing, organizers had also arranged for students to take classes at Freedom Schools. The New York Times estimates that “between 90,000 and 100,000 [students] attended Freedom Schools for the day.”<sup>113</sup> Although black children did make up the majority of students, there were also Hispanic and White students that chose to attend the schools. What helped facilitate attendance at the Freedom Schools was its “pop-up” functionality, with a number of them sprouting across the five boroughs in forms of churches and neighborhood meeting places.<sup>114</sup>

Despite having locations scattered across the City, the Freedom Schools were able to

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<sup>111</sup> Bigart, Homer. “Thousands of Orderly Marchers Besiege School Board's Offices: THOUSANDS MARCH ON SCHOOL BOARD.” New York Times (1923-Current File), Feb 04, 1964. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/115658813?accountid=10141>.

<sup>112</sup> Bigart, Homer. “Thousands of Orderly Marchers Besiege School Board's Offices: THOUSANDS MARCH ON SCHOOL BOARD.”

<sup>113</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1964. <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/02/04/archives/freedom-school-staffs-varied-but-classes-followed-pattern.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

maintain a sense of structure to their day by following a program established by the Harlem Parents Committee titled “Freedom School Lesson Plan.”<sup>115</sup> The lesson plan was unlike what students typically learned in their public schools. The *New York Times* reported that at the Freedom Schools, kids learned about:

“slavery, and the tribulations of Negroes in the South before the Civil War. They heard of notable Negro inventors like Jan Maezlinger, who devised a machine for making shoes. Other names cited were George Washington Carver, the Negro Scientist, and Mahalia Jackson, the singer. The meaning of freedom was discussed. Reasons for the boycott were explained. The session ended with the singing of freedom songs, including “We Shall Overcome.” Then the assemblage was divided into small groups, each with a teacher, for further discussions. One group wrote letters to Mayor Wagner and James B. Donovan, the president of the Board of Education.”<sup>116</sup>

Learning about the plight and struggle of prominent Black Americans like Jan Maezlinger and George Washington Carver sent a message to the students that they too could rise above the hate and racism. Students also wrote and sent out letters that exhibited a peaceful tone to the Mayor and president of the BOE.<sup>117</sup> According to a school official, “the letters expressed appreciation of the Board of Education’s efforts to meet the integration problem but urged that further steps be taken ‘to improve the schools.’”<sup>118</sup> Although the Freedom Schools integrated civil rights education into their lesson plans, others also maintained standard lesson plans that covered math and science.<sup>119</sup> In fact, principals and directors split into two different groups of thought regarding the purpose of the schools. Some were “fervent advocates of mass action to end integration.

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<sup>115</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

<sup>116</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

<sup>117</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

<sup>118</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

<sup>119</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

There were many others, however, whose principal interest was merely to provide for children not attending school [the day of the protest] an alternative to spending the day on the streets.”<sup>120</sup> Although the initial purpose of the schools was to provide alternatives to a typical public school education, they served the added purpose of functioning as a sense of calm amidst the chaos and providing a perspective seldom seen in public school classrooms.

The Freedom Schools provided a space where students could learn and protest simultaneously. The day, although abnormal, was best summarized by William Washington, a high school senior who volunteered to be a Freedom School teacher. He wrote that at its core, “boycotting is getting together to not do something.”<sup>121</sup> The Freedom Schools were an atypical space that allowed students and teachers alike to get together to not do something and send a message to higher ups. Although not all students who had been absent from school protested or attended a Freedom School, it was encouraging for the civil rights leaders who had organized the protest, that those who did, did so passionately, and were not exclusively black. The schools played a crucial role in the boycott by showing that public schools were not the only institution for minority students to receive an education.

The boycott prompted a myriad of responses from the City and the Board of Education. Philip Bigger writes that Donovan, upon first seeing the boycott, proclaimed it a “fizzle.”<sup>122</sup> In addition to this, Donovan struck back at the teachers who participated in

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<sup>120</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

<sup>121</sup> Trumbull, Robert. “Freedom School Staffs Varied But Classes Followed Pattern.”

<sup>122</sup> Bigger, Philip J. *Negotiator: The Life and Career of James B. Donovan*. Bethlehem [Pa.]: Lehigh University Press, 2006. 174.

the boycott by eliminating their wages for the day.<sup>123</sup> In doing so, Donovan claimed that “we don’t pay people to march around buildings.”<sup>124</sup> Donovan also threatened to hold the teachers’ act of protesting against them in potential future promotions.<sup>125</sup> Donovan’s response set a dangerous precedent that teachers were not free to express their views without facing retribution. Additionally, Donovan and the greater Board refused to meet with the leaders of the civil rights organizations.<sup>126</sup> The BOE’s response received a significant sign of support when the Governor of New York, Nelson D. Rockefeller, stated that he saw the boycott as “unfortunate.”<sup>127</sup> Rockefeller’s response coupled with Donovan’s actions, regardless of whether they were directed at teachers or civil rights activists, were indicative of the frustration that city officials felt towards the boycott and the greater struggle for integration.

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The February 3, 1964 boycott sparked a number of other other protests in the following months which reflected a spectrum of positions about the integration of New York’s schools. Moderates served as the group that struck back quickest and hardest against the February 3rd protest, preaching a mixed message of strict anti-busing, while claiming to be pro-integration. A March 12 protest organized by primarily white mothers preached a pro-integration message. This pro-integration group, made up of “thousands

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<sup>123</sup> Bigger, Philip J. *Negotiator: The Life and Career of James B. Donovan*. 174

<sup>124</sup> Bigger, Philip J. *Negotiator: The Life and Career of James B. Donovan*. 174

<sup>125</sup> Bigger, Philip J. *Negotiator: The Life and Career of James B. Donovan*. 174

<sup>126</sup> Bigger, Philip J. *Negotiator: The Life and Career of James B. Donovan*. 174

<sup>127</sup> “Governor Condemns Boycott!” *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Feb 22, 1964.

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226767413?accountid=10141>.

of white parents - largely mothers - marched across the Brooklyn Bridge in slushy snow. They sang and chanted in unison against busing their children to schools outside their racially-segregated neighborhood.”<sup>128</sup> Although the group was supportive of ending segregation in the school system, they were, by all accounts, against the idea of busing, especially when it came to their own children. In response, according to a recent article, the activists “pushed not only against the mostly white families who staunchly opposed using transportation to achieve integration, but also against moderates who warned of what might happen if activists pushed families too far.”<sup>129</sup> While civil rights activists believed their efforts to be noble and true, whites across the city saw it as menacing and overstepping. While the March 12th group thought of themselves as being pro-integration, civil rights leaders and activists did not agree. In response to the March 12th protest, Rev. Galamison stated that “few would have believed that we could see New Yorkers shamelessly parading for segregation.”<sup>130</sup> His statement reflected the wider held view by many other activists and protesters from the Freedom Day march. The response by civil rights activists suggests that they wanted full integration, busing included, or nothing at all.

The fear that moderates had regarding civil rights activism was not unfounded.

John F. Kraft, Inc., a polling company, conducted a survey six months after the Freedom

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<sup>128</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “Segregation Has Been the Story of New York City’s Schools for 50 Years.” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/nyregion/school-segregation-new-york.html>.

<sup>129</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “Segregation Has Been the Story of New York City’s Schools for 50 Years.”

<sup>130</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “Segregation Has Been the Story of New York City’s Schools for 50 Years.”

Day boycott.<sup>131</sup> Survey results showed that a majority of white New Yorkers thought that the “Negro civil rights movement had gone too far.”<sup>132</sup> Additionally, almost half of the respondents believed that the nonviolent demonstrations had actually hurt the cause of integration instead of helping it.<sup>133</sup> However, most striking was the response given regarding busing and school pairing. Eighty percent of respondents “said they were opposed to the school pairing plans of the Board of Education. Of that 80 percent, 45 percent said they would send their children to private schools before allowing them to be transferred.”<sup>134</sup> This response was especially poignant because in a survey conducted at the start of the summer, approximately 50 percent of respondents said that they were opposed to school pairings.<sup>135</sup> The change in attitude could be attributed to the violent events that occurred in the City throughout the summer such as the Harlem race riots, when a police officer shot and killed a black teen.<sup>136</sup> In response to the killing, thousands of black residents swarmed the streets of Harlem to protest what they saw as unjust and racist behavior.<sup>137</sup> The survey results taken after the race riots show the growing disconnect between blacks and whites in the City that would continue to escalate in the upcoming years and continue to impact integration plans.

The February 3rd march was successful in its mission of acquiring an integration plan from the Board of Education. However, whether the plan was up to the standards of

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<sup>131</sup> Powledge, Fred. “Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive.” *The New York Times*, September 21, 1964.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1964/09/21/106985061.html?pageNumber=1>

<sup>132</sup> Powledge, Fred. “Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive.”

<sup>133</sup> Powledge, Fred. “Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive.”

<sup>134</sup> Powledge, Fred. “Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive.”

<sup>135</sup> Powledge, Fred. “Poll Shows Whites in City Resent Civil Rights Drive.”

<sup>136</sup> “Harlem Race Riots of 1964,” [https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/disasters/riots-harlem\\_1964.html](https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/nycdata/disasters/riots-harlem_1964.html).

<sup>137</sup> “Harlem Race Riots of 1964”

the activists was a different matter. Superintendent Calvin Gross introduced the plan on May 28th, 1964, almost four months after the initial pro-integration boycott. The plan intended to have “as many as 40,000 students... transferred to different schools through a combination of school rezoning and a pairing up of mostly black and white schools. Students would then have been bussed to integrate the schools.”<sup>138</sup> Gross, according to the *New York Times*, “stressed that the proposed steps are only part of what the Board [of Education] considers ‘its plan for quality integrated education.’”<sup>139</sup> The plan was not exclusive to one grade, but would extend from elementary school to high school. It was the high school level, nevertheless, that held the most promise for the plan since incoming ninth grade students had the opportunity to “select their high school and later transfer, if they regret their choice.”<sup>140</sup> Officials believed that giving students the ability to choose high schools would positively impact elementary school children by opening seats in those lower grades, negating the issue of overcrowding.<sup>141</sup> Despite the seeming promise of the high school portion of the plan, it was ultimately only limited to ten schools across the city.<sup>142</sup> In the following days, the bill was unanimously voted in favor of by the Board of Education.<sup>143</sup> The announcement of the bill showed that the pressure the protests placed on the BOE worked. Whether the progress was to be accepted and maintained by the greater public was a different question. Although the Freedom Day

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<sup>138</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “Segregation Has Been the Story of New York City’s Schools for 50 Years.”

<sup>139</sup> “The School Integration Plan.” *The New York Times*, May 29, 1964.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1964/05/29/97267499.html?pageNumber=28>.

<sup>140</sup> “The School Integration Plan.” *The New York Times*

<sup>141</sup> “The School Integration Plan.” *The New York Times*

<sup>142</sup> “The School Integration Plan.” *The New York Times*

<sup>143</sup> “The School Integration Plan.” *The New York Times*

Boycott did compel the Board of Education to release an integration plan, few groups, regardless of where they stood on the integration issue, viewed it as acceptable.<sup>144</sup> As a result, despite the Board of Education's eagerness to implement the plan, it fizzled out due to lack of support from groups on either side of the aisle.

The events of the early 1960s sparked a period of urgency about school integration for Rev. Galamison and civil rights groups across the City. They saw the City fail to take action following *Brown v. Board of Education* and were compelled to take matters into their own hands. Although the boycott set out to create change, the response the BOE provided proved to be inconsequential. The lack of progress ensured that the fight to integrate the New York City public schools would continue for the next decade, if not the remainder of the century. Although the plan may not have been to the standards of the civil rights activists, their efforts in rallying so many people illustrated the power protests hold and the pressure that they can put on officials to enact change for the people, by the people.

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<sup>144</sup> Terte, Robert H. "N.A.A.C.P. and CORE Reject Gross's School-Integration Plan." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Jun 03, 1964.  
<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/115807863?accountid=10141>.



## The Marathon Continues: Education in New York from 1967-1980

Following the Freedom Day boycott, the BOE appeared to have listened to the qualms of the activists, and put out a plan intended to integrate numerous schools across the city. Ultimately, the Board of Education tabled the plan, due to pressure from teacher groups and white parents. Following the turbulent 1964, The Board of Education continued to struggle in the face of both racial and financial adversity best symbolized by two important events in New York City history. First was a power struggle in 1968 between the United Federation for Teachers and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community board over decentralization. Second, the fiscal crisis of 1975 pushed the BOE to make a series of budget cuts, which disproportionately affected students of color. These two cases revealed that the BOE's consistent bias against children of color and inability to provide them with a quality education. The lack of parental initiative and community organization across the city simultaneously prevented a boycott on the scale of Freedom Day from retaking place as well as serious action from being taken against the Board of Education.

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While the Freedom Day boycott pressured the Board of Education to put out an integration plan, the lack of communication between communities of color and the BOE persisted. This issue of lack of communication was one of the key issues leading up to the 1964 protest and furthered the notion for civil rights activists that the school board was too centralized, that is the board held too much power. The centralization and

consolidation of power had particularly adverse effects on communities of color. The negative effects came into sharp focus in the struggle between the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community board in 1968. However, the struggle between the UFT and Ocean Hill-Brownsville community served as the boiling point in what was a multi-year fray that extended to a number of neighborhoods of color.

The issue of decentralization dates to September 1966, when East Harlem parents and activists boycotted their local middle school, IS 201.<sup>145</sup> According to Richard Kahlenberg, the school was built with the intention of being racially integrated, yet when the school opened its doors, the population remained segregated.<sup>146</sup> In response to the failed integration, East Harlem residents demanded “the school be either integrated or given to them to control.”<sup>147</sup> In spite of this demand, the boycott, according to researchers Maurice Berube and Marilyn Gittell, “marked the end of the school integration movement.”<sup>148</sup> In response to these demands, the BOE granted the district the control over the school that it wanted. With the newly granted control, parents and community leaders sought to have a “Negro or Puerto Rican principal to raise the image of the children; an integrated staff specially trained for the school; a full supply of textbooks relevant to community interests; a well-equipped library and language laboratories; a full

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<sup>145</sup> “TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE,” *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://gittell.newmedialab.cuny.edu/items/show/256>.

<sup>146</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. Columbia Studies in Contemporary American History. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 69

<sup>147</sup> “TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE,” *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*

<sup>148</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 69

staff of school secretaries and teacher aides.”<sup>149</sup> The UFT was scared by the idea of having the hiring and firing of teachers be left in the hands of community leaders.<sup>150</sup> As a result, the UFT saw the demands as “extreme,” and boycotted in protest of them.<sup>151</sup> This ultimately led the BOE to scrap the autonomy the community wanted.<sup>152</sup> However, in lieu of the original plan, the BOE, in collaboration with community leaders and the UFT, created a new plan that granted decentralization powers to three school districts across Manhattan and Brooklyn as part of an experiment.<sup>153</sup>

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood was one of the districts chosen to partake in the decentralization experiment. Community leaders had advocated in the past for more power due to a failed integration plan. According to Richard Kahlenberg, the integration plan called for the busing of four thousand Brownsville children to a number of schools that were primarily white.<sup>154</sup> The students’ involvement with integration showed a willingness to be the change that they so desperately wanted to see, but the negative welcome they received at the white schools resulted in half of the students returning to their original Brownsville schools.<sup>155</sup> Kahlenberg notes that the failed integration pushed parents and community leaders towards decentralization, seeing it as a

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<sup>149</sup> Goldberg, Gertrude S. “I.S. 201: An Educational Landmark.” *IRCD Bulletin* 2, no. 5 (Winter -1967 1966). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED011911.pdf>. 4

<sup>150</sup> Spencer, David and Charles Wilson. “The Case for Community Control--in Harlem.” *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Jun 01, 1968. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226690381?accountid=10141>.

<sup>151</sup> “TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE,” *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*

<sup>152</sup> “TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE,” *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*

<sup>153</sup> “TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE,” *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*

<sup>154</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 73

<sup>155</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 73

chance to try something different.<sup>156</sup> As a part of this experiment, residents within the community were allowed to vote in order to choose who they wanted as parent representatives.<sup>157</sup> However, out of the 4,000 eligible voters, only 1,049 voted.<sup>158</sup> The low participation rate among parents was not beneficial to the neighborhood's cause of obtaining autonomy. By not voting, parents sent the message that they were not as invested in their children's education as they had portrayed themselves to be. Regardless, those who did vote made the most of their new power by electing a group of parents to represent them. This new group of elected parents became known as the community board. In establishing their community board, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community hoped to hire their teachers as opposed to having random, often low quality, teachers sent to the schools by the Board of Education. According to a parent panel that consisted of both black and white parents, the residents wanted "change of the education for our children in our communities."<sup>159</sup> Parents also advocated for "the opportunity for our children to learn the same way that other children in other areas learn."<sup>160</sup> Those on the panel claimed that in spite of the seven new principals that they hired, change would not be possible if "some assistant principals and some teachers refuse to cooperate." Hiring and firing teachers based on community input served as the community's effort to have

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<sup>156</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 73

<sup>157</sup> "TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE," *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*

<sup>158</sup> "TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE," *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*

<sup>159</sup> *Ocean Hill-Brownsville Parents Speak, 1968 (Excerpts)*. Museum of the City of New York, 1968. <https://vimeo.com/29063912>.

<sup>160</sup> *Ocean Hill-Brownsville Parents Speak, 1968 (Excerpts)*. Museum of the City of New York

their voice heard regarding who would be educating their children in a time when the Board seldom recognized the needs of low-income, minority communities.

The community board chose to initially remove via involuntary transfer only 13 teachers and six administrators because they were “allegedly incompetent or had tried to sabotage the demonstration project.”<sup>161</sup> However, the removal of these officials and teachers quickly snowballed into a protest of hundreds of teachers, led by the UFT, who claimed that the community board overstepped its power. The UFT believed that “the transfers were in fact firings, and were done in violation of due process.”<sup>162</sup> Headed by Albert Shanker, the UFT claimed to have the best interests of teachers and the community. The removal of 200 teachers “would result in no education in that district,” Shanker declared.<sup>163</sup> Refuting the notion that the transfers were racist and targeted by the community board, Dr. Marilyn Gittell notes that “There is nothing novel or unusual about the attempt to transfer teachers out of Ocean-Hill Brownsville. Transfers are made constantly through the school system, although quietly.”<sup>164</sup> The contradicting statement by Gittell suggests that Shanker overstated the firings. Shanker’s comment showed the disconnect between the community board and education officials. By protesting this

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<sup>161</sup> Buder, Leonard. "CITY SCHOOL BOARD FAILS TO RESOLVE BROOKLYN DISPUTE: MCCOY REPEATS DEMAND FOR TRANSFER OF 200 TEACHERS OUT OF OCEAN HILL CITY BOARD FAILS TO SETTLE DISPUTE." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Sep 04, 1968. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/118418898?accountid=10141>.

<sup>162</sup> “TIMELINE OCEANHILL BROWNSVILLE,” *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*

<sup>163</sup> Buder, Leonard. "CITY SCHOOL BOARD FAILS TO RESOLVE BROOKLYN DISPUTE: MCCOY REPEATS DEMAND FOR TRANSFER OF 200 TEACHERS OUT OF OCEAN HILL CITY BOARD FAILS TO SETTLE DISPUTE."

<sup>164</sup> Marks, Seymour. “School Decentralization Issue Splits a City,” *Marilyn Gittell Digital Archive*, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://gittell.newmedialab.cuny.edu/items/show/218>.

decision, the UFT and Board of Education effectively said that this community's voice did not matter and that their opinions were of little importance.

The United Federation of Teachers protest lasted for the initial weeks of September and resulted in more violent and hostile encounters than earlier protests. According to Kahlenberg, “Picketing teachers were cursed by teachers. Community board members were so opposed to the strike that they gave the names of striking male teachers to the Selective Service, saying they were no longer employed or eligible for draft deferment.”<sup>165</sup> Additionally, “when five teachers sought to return to JHS 271, black militants blocked the doors. Parents screamed ‘the children will never let you stay.’ Extremists painted swastikas on the building.”<sup>166</sup> Violence was not restricted to just one borough or school district. Across the river in Harlem, violence was similarly reported, with teachers reporting that while picketing, “they had been slapped and kicked.”<sup>167</sup> The hostility continued past the protesting phase. While teachers prepared to go back to school, parents in neighborhoods such as Harlem organized and “vowed that they will appear at their schools and bodily block certain teachers from entering their schools to teach their children.”<sup>168</sup> As a token of their serious demeanor regarding the blockade, parents “passed around pictures of the faces of teachers [who had picketed]” and

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<sup>165</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 80

<sup>166</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 95

<sup>167</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 82

<sup>168</sup> Slack, Sara. “Violence Threatened as Teachers Return.” *New York Amsterdam News* (1962-1993), Sep 30, 1967.  
<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226748397?accountid=10141>.

threatened that they would “make it so tough, frightening, and unsafe for teachers who picketed our schools that they’ll leave on their own accord.”<sup>169</sup> The hostility brought on by parents and activists was a far cry from the peaceful protesting that occurred only 4 years prior. The escalation towards violence suggests that although parents were similarly fed up with the administration and UFT, they lacked the cohesion across the whole city to organize a protest on the scale of the Freedom Day boycott.

The newfound hostility was a byproduct of the resurgent Black Power movement that gripped a number of black organizations not just in New York but across the country. Black Power resulted in division not only among blacks, but white allies as well. Shanker, who was once a member of CORE, was now considered an enemy by the group. CORE, who now “embraced Black Power and renounced nonviolence,” saw peaceful protesting as getting nowhere.<sup>170</sup> Those involved with Black Power believed that “black children do not need anything special... They just need unbiased teachers with the right pro-black ideology.”<sup>171</sup> Activists, it appeared, no longer wanted to integrate. This new view on education from certain activists for black students further represented a break from what civil rights activists advocated for less than a decade ago.

Following the UFT’s protest, the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) emerged as an important ally for the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community board in their fight for decentralization and autonomy. On October 9, 1968, NYCLU released a report

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<sup>169</sup> Slack, Sara. "Violence Threatened as Teachers Return." New York Amsterdam News

<sup>170</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 74

<sup>171</sup> Kahlenberg, Richard D. *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy*. 80

that rejected the notion that the community board was trying to secede from the New York City public school system. In analyzing the fight between the UFT and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community board, the NYCLU asserted that the fight “was not a result of local community control. On the contrary... the chaos resulted from efforts to undermine local community control of the schools.”<sup>172</sup> Additionally, the community would still answer to the New York City Superintendent of the school system, as well as the State Commissioner of Education.<sup>173</sup> The report suggested that the community board was not asking for full autonomy from the BOE, but instead “it was merely seeking powers already possessed by every suburban or rural township in New York State.”<sup>174</sup> The BOE’s opposition to the community board’s quest for autonomy suggests that the BOE saw its consolidation of power as its greatest asset and did not want to devolve its control to the communities.

The 1968 protest came as a result of differences in ideologies not only between the UFT, BOE, and civil rights groups, but also between black activists. The protest resulted in the dissolution of community control, as well as an agreement between the BOE and the UFT to send teachers back to the schools that they had been protesting. But the process left parents, especially minority parents, on the sidelines without any input. It was a high price to pay with regards to the initial choice that community leaders had made in removing the 13 teachers. The decision to not establish community control,

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<sup>172</sup> “A Report on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Controversy.” New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993), Nov 16, 1968.

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226657328?accountid=10141>.

<sup>173</sup> “A Report on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Controversy.” New York Amsterdam News

<sup>174</sup> “A Report on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Controversy.” New York Amsterdam News



especially in low-income, minority neighborhoods, proved to be costly not just in the immediate aftermath of the 1968 protest, but several years down the line as well, when the City came to grips with a fiscal crisis that came close to reaching the level of the Great Depression.

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In 1975, New York experienced its worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. The fiscal crisis stemmed from a number of factors, including a credit squeeze that made it unable to borrow money to manage its monetary situation, as well as a drastic reduction in revenue while simultaneously experiencing an increase in expenditures.<sup>175</sup> The increase in population that New York City had experienced for the last number of decades also proved to be a significant factor in accelerating the fiscal crisis. The *New York Times* reports that the “huge influx of impoverished blacks and Hispanic people [placed] greater burdens on government.”<sup>176</sup> In particular, the City provided “more health, education, and social services to a greater extent than any other locality.”<sup>177</sup> Joshua Freeman argues that in this time period, New York City operated with “a belief in the necessity of using the government... to help the disadvantaged.”<sup>178</sup> Despite the increase in usage of services, taxpayer funds began to decline in the early 1970s, which was compounded by substantial rise in unemployment. It led to budget cuts

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<sup>175</sup> Weisman, Steven R. “Root of City Fiscal Crisis Is Traced and Explained.” *The New York Times*, July 7, 1975. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1975/07/07/78259727.html?pageNumber=48>.

<sup>176</sup> Weisman, Steven R. “Root of City Fiscal Crisis Is Traced and Explained.”

<sup>177</sup> Weisman, Steven R. “Root of City Fiscal Crisis Is Traced and Explained.”

<sup>178</sup> Phillips-Fein, Kim. “The Legacy of the 1970s Fiscal Crisis.” *The Nation*, April 16, 2013. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/legacy-1970s-fiscal-crisis/>.

across the City's departments, resulting in thousands of jobs lost.<sup>179</sup> The combination of unemployment in the city, deteriorating services and rising crime led to the acceleration of white flight in the City.<sup>180</sup> The City's population of color simultaneously increased in the 1970s. The Hispanic population in New York surged drastically throughout the 70s, coming to represent 20% of all New Yorkers.<sup>181</sup> Similarly, the black population also increased 7% throughout the 70s.<sup>182</sup> The influx in population resulted in New York's public school system similarly absorbing a substantial amount of students of color, many of whom came from low-income families. These areas were already afflicted by poor schooling conditions, such as overcrowding, and the newest residents of New York further compounded the pre-existing issues. The financial crisis' toll took time to make itself apparent, but regardless, its impact resonated with millions.

Years after the city began to cut back on costs, the Board of Education began to feel the pain of what other departments had suffered. Despite the increase in underprivileged students, the education department was among the hardest hit by budget cuts.<sup>183</sup> As a result of the cuts, the City's school system had only 43,600 teachers across 981 schools, for more than 1 million students.<sup>184</sup> The teachers who had managed to keep their job saw increased class sizes and according to the New York Times, it was "not at

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<sup>179</sup> Phillips-Fein, Kim. "The Legacy of the 1970s Fiscal Crisis." *The Nation*, April 16, 2013. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/legacy-1970s-fiscal-crisis/>.

<sup>180</sup> Litow, Stanley S. "Restructuring New York City's Schools." *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 1992. <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1215&context=ylpr>. 31.

<sup>181</sup> Oreskes, Michael. "CENSUS TRACES RADICAL SHIFTS IN NEW YORK CITY'S POPULATION." *The New York Times*, September 20, 1982.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1982/09/20/162956.html?pageNumber=1>.

<sup>182</sup> Oreskes, Michael. "CENSUS TRACES RADICAL SHIFTS IN NEW YORK CITY'S POPULATION."

<sup>183</sup> Litow, Stanley S. "Restructuring New York City's Schools." 31.

<sup>184</sup> Perretti, Fred. "Financial Crisis Crippling New York's Public Schools." *The New York Times*, December 12, 1976. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1976/12/12/121537743.html?pageNumber=1>.

all unusual to have classes of 40 students or more.”<sup>185</sup> The issue of firing teachers exacerbated due in part to the “last hired, first fired” policy. Put in place by the UFT, the policy hurt black and Puerto Rican teachers more than white teachers because minority teachers were among the most recently hired.<sup>186</sup> When the fiscal crisis occurred, these same minority educators were the first to let go. For schools in minority communities who hired these teachers of color, their dismissal was especially poignant. Helen Campbell, President of the P.S. 201 Parent Teacher Association, disapproved of the firings, saying “they are our best teachers. They understand our problems.”<sup>187</sup> Campbell was not alone in her view. For many community leaders, the teachers who were laid off represented “teachers who we know have interest in our children.”<sup>188</sup> Notably, children taught under teachers of color were more prosperous than they had been under white teachers. According to civil rights advocate Alice Kornegay, the increase of minority teachers led to an “increase in the number of Black students going to colleges from Harlem schools.”<sup>189</sup> The firing of so many minority teachers represented a dismissal of the ideals that parents and community leaders had fought for in prior protests.

The removal of so many teachers in such a short period also had significant implications for the everyday life of students, especially in the low income communities. As a result of the loss of teachers, “the school week was shortened by ninety minutes

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<sup>185</sup> Perretti, Fred. “Financial Crisis Crippling New York’s Public Schools.”

<sup>186</sup> Anekwe, Simon. “Harlem Parents and Educators Unite for Better Education.” *New York Amsterdam News* (1962-1993), Jan 10, 1976.

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226523572?accountid=10141>.

<sup>187</sup> Anekwe, Simon. “Harlem Parents and Educators Unite for Better Education.”

<sup>188</sup> Anekwe, Simon. “Harlem Parents and Educators Unite for Better Education.”

<sup>189</sup> Anekwe, Simon. “Harlem Parents and Educators Unite for Better Education.”

because the schools could not afford to pay for teacher preparation periods... many students had seven or eight different teachers during the school year.”<sup>190</sup> The inconsistency of teachers resulted in differing ways that students would have to apply themselves in order to meet the differing expectations of the various teachers. The fiscal crisis also had a profound effect on the future of students who were currently in the public school system. The budget cuts forced schools across the city to drastically reduce their guidance counselors, providing only 1 guidance counselor for every 1,000 students.

<sup>191</sup> At both the 8th grade and high school level, this cutback was especially detrimental because guidance counselors were often the only person whom students relied on to help them to apply to high schools and colleges. Providing only 1 guidance counselor for every 1,000 students ensured that these students would not receive the advice and guidance that they needed to make the most sound choice. The cuts to the Board of Education thus shaped not only the students’ academic experience, but their life afterwards as well. Whereas students in white and more affluent communities could rely on their parents for high school and college guidance, students from minority, predominantly low-income communities could not rely on that same kind of life experience from their parents to guide them.

The fight for racial equality in the classrooms did not end soon after the fiscal crisis of the 70s. Due to the fiscal crisis, many racial issues, not just those limited to education, saw themselves get placed on the back burner. Under Mayor-elect Edward Koch, the City planned to revoke affirmative action in hiring teachers for the public

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<sup>190</sup> Litow, Stanley S. “Restructuring New York City’s Schools.” 31.

<sup>191</sup> Perretti, Fred. “Financial Crisis Crippling New York’s Public Schools.”

school system. Koch's position represented another false truth that black citizens and leaders had mistakenly chosen to believe. Koch's stance represented a step back from the plan that the Board of Education had just installed. Under the Board's plan, laid-off teachers from the financial crisis were "being rehired are assigned on a racial basis."<sup>192</sup> According to J. Jerome Harris, the Superintendent of School District 13 in Brooklyn, newly hired teachers were "assigned to predominantly white districts."<sup>193</sup> The designation of these teachers of colors to predominantly white districts ignored what parents and activists in communities of color had preached prior to the firing of the teachers, that is, that students of color learned best under teachers of color. As a result, in what was supposed to be a reconstructing phase, communities of color and civil rights leaders were already being neglected. Minority teachers were being rehired but not placed at the schools that they taught at before the firing. Although civil rights activists were happy to see teachers of color rehired, their placement within the education system left much desired. Harris summarizes this point best, saying "I hate to lose the opportunity to hire Black teachers. I'm glad that they're working, but I wish they were working in my district."<sup>194</sup> The new rehiring policy put activists in the tough position of having to compromise and settling for less than what they deserved.

The struggle for educational equality clearly did not cease after the Freedom Day Boycott. Throughout the 70s, civil rights groups and minority parents continued to face

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<sup>192</sup> Rollins, Bryant. "Ed Board Race Plan OK ... but." New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993), Oct 08, 1977.

<http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226525399?accountid=10141>.

<sup>193</sup> Rollins, Bryant. "Ed Board Race Plan OK ... but."

<sup>194</sup> Rollins, Bryant. "Ed Board Race Plan OK ... but."

challenges in their battle to secure equality, albeit through financial issues and union pushbacks. Despite the struggles that parents and kids may have faced, they lacked the cohesion that made the 1964 protest possible. As a result, parents and groups often resorted to violence or settled for less, be it from the Board of Education or the mayor.

## Conclusion

New York City's struggle to integrate its public schools continues today.

However, the fight for integration has taken on a new identity in today's world. It is one that is complicated by the ever-increasing diversity in the City. Although activists still see full-scale integration as feasible, past encounters have proven otherwise and New York's growing population makes that dream more distant everyday. The influx of Asian immigrants during the 1990s has further complicated the question of how to increase diversity in the public school system, especially in specialized high schools. Under the current administration of Mayor De Blasio and School Chancellor Richard Carranza, the City has installed initiatives intended to uplift certain minorities at the expense of others, notably Asians. With these initiatives, the City is destined to repeat its past failures and in particular, reignite racial tensions. The issue lies not with race, but rather with class. The sooner that the City can acknowledge this, the quicker that students of all races, but especially black and Hispanic, will benefit.

New York City is more ethnically diverse today than ever before. As of July 1, 2019, the City had a population that consisted of 29.1% Hispanic, 24.3% black, 13.9% Asian, and 42.7% white.<sup>195</sup> Consequently, New York City is now a city whose white population is a minority. New York's racial makeup is reflected in the racial makeup of the school system. Today, the system is composed of 40.6% Hispanic students, 25.5%

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<sup>195</sup> "Quick Facts: New York City, New York," July 1, 2019.  
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/newyorkcitynewyork>.

black, 16.2% Asian, and 15.1% white.<sup>196</sup> The low population of white students is particularly striking and suggests that these students largely attend schools elsewhere. According to a study conducted by the Manhattan Institute, 52% of all white students have largely fled the public school system in favor of a private school education.<sup>197</sup> The congregation of white students at these private schools is reflected in the data below, showing that they make up two-thirds of the private school student population.

Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Students by Location and Sector, 2018–19						
Location/Sector		White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	Other
New York City	Public District Schools	16.1%	40.9%	22.3%	18.0%	2.7%
	Private Schools	66.9%	12.6%	10.2%	5.7%	4.5%
	Public Charter Schools	4.3%	39.0%	51.7%	2.7%	2.3%
Rest of New York State	Public District Schools	62.1%	18.5%	10.2%	5.5%	3.7%
	Private Schools	76.1%	7.0%	7.7%	5.2%	4.0%
	Public Charter Schools	13.7%	21.7%	57.8%	2.9%	3.9%
State Total—All Sectors		46.6%	25.0%	15.8%	9.2%	3.4%

*Manhattan Institute*

The difference in school choice by race reflects the classism that is ingrained into society today. Those who are middle to upper class are often white and have the means to send their children to private schools. Low-income families, who are often minorities, must rely on public schooling unless their child gets offered a private school education via scholarship. The difference in schooling is further multiplied by the fact that so many of the public schools are archaic and underfunded, furthering the divide between the two types of schools in New York and making it that much harder for minority students to find success in public schools.

<sup>196</sup> “DOE Data at a Glance,” <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/reports/doe-data-at-a-glance>.

<sup>197</sup> Domanico, Ray. “A Statistical Profile of New York’s K-12 Educational Sector: Race, Income and Religion,” February 19, 2020. <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/complex-demographics-new-york-public-private-schools>.



The large minority population does not necessarily mean that there is a large portion of them who are affluent. New York City's sports a population of which 63.1% of all residents live either near poverty or in it.<sup>198</sup> The number of low-income students translates effortlessly into the school system. Of the 1,126,501 students in the City's public school system, 72.8% are economically disadvantaged.<sup>199</sup> Many of the students who attend the schools do so not just to fulfill educational requirements, but also because of the other services these schools provide. With programs such as free lunch and after school learning, these schools more often than not provide low income students with a consistent meal as well as a safe haven from spending time in the streets.

Asians make up the greatest number of those in poverty, accounting for 24.1% followed by Hispanics with 23.9% and blacks at 19.2%. Despite this high poverty rate, Asians also make up the greatest percentage of students enrolled in specialized high schools. At the Big Three specialized high schools-Bronx Science, Brooklyn Technical, and Stuyvesant-Asians make up at least 60% of the school's population.<sup>200</sup> The high poverty rate experienced by Asians translates to their high schools as well. Brooklyn Tech has a 59.4% poverty rate, Bronx Science a 42% poverty rate, and Stuyvesant a 41.7% poverty rate. Although the poverty rate in these schools is drastically less than the citywide rate of 74%, it remains notable nonetheless. The data suggests that for a large portion of the specialized high schools' population, the specialized high schools exist as a form of upwards social mobility. Additionally, external factors may influence how these

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<sup>198</sup> "NYC Opportunity 2018 Poverty Report," <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/NYCPov-Brochure-2018-Digital.pdf>.

<sup>199</sup> "DOE Data at a Glance,"

<sup>200</sup> "School Diversity in NYC," <https://council.nyc.gov/data/school-diversity-in-nyc/>.

students are able to achieve success while other minorities find themselves struggling to get to the same place.

Under Mayor Bill De Blasio, New York City has attempted to close the achievement gap between black and Hispanic students versus Asian and white students. The City has installed programs such as Renewal and thought about replacing the specialized high school exam with a more inclusive method of getting in. However, like the original integration effort almost 60 years ago, both initiatives failed. The Renewal program may be even a bigger failure than the integration plan. According to the New York Times, the program dedicated \$773 million “to improve the city’s 94 poorest-performing schools by showering them with millions of dollars in social services and teacher training.”<sup>201</sup> The City established a series of goals that the recipients of the funds were supposed to meet. These goals included “higher test scores, increased graduation rates, and other academic measures.”<sup>202</sup> In spite of those funds, about a third of the schools that received support were not likely to meet their goals and thus deemed as failures.<sup>203</sup> Although the schools were likely to fail, De Blasio kept them open in an effort to see if money really wouldn’t solve the problem. The decision to keep them open was a stark contrast to De Blasio’s predecessor Michael Bloomberg who closed over 100 schools during his tenure.<sup>204</sup> Although De Blasio can be commended for keeping the

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<sup>201</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “New York Knew Some Schools in Its \$773 Million Plan Were Likely to Fail. It Kept Children in Them Anyway.”

<sup>202</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “New York Knew Some Schools in Its \$773 Million Plan Were Likely to Fail. It Kept Children in Them Anyway.”

<sup>203</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “New York Knew Some Schools in Its \$773 Million Plan Were Likely to Fail. It Kept Children in Them Anyway.”

<sup>204</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “New York Knew Some Schools in Its \$773 Million Plan Were Likely to Fail. It Kept Children in Them Anyway.”

schools open, it did end up a costly one without the results to show for it. The varying degrees of success for the schools enrolled in the program hint at a larger issue at hand that requires more than just providing more funding and extending school hours.

Although New York City public schools suffer from lack of funding and resources, a key issue also lies in the academic curriculum. Curriculum is largely focused around the New York State exams, one for reading and one for math. These exams take place in April leaving teachers with two months of free time.<sup>205</sup> Although teachers may make use of this time to teach new concepts or expand on older ones, they often don't. As a result, students become checked out by April and stop applying themselves in ways they might have prior to the exams. According to parents and teachers alike, the federally mandated exams have lost even more of their meaning in recent years due to the number of changes surrounding the exams.<sup>206</sup> Schools can now opt to take the test on computers if they have the means to, setting up another class and racial barrier, and exams have become shorter, taken in two days as opposed to the traditional three day schedule.<sup>207</sup> Lack of consistency with the exam breeds trouble with analyzing students' results over years, as well as making it difficult for those students to study for the exam. As research increasingly shows, exams are not an objective form of viewing success. Consequently, schools would be better off abandoning the exam and creating a more personalized

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<sup>205</sup> Katz, Steven E. "2020–21 Elementary and Intermediate Level Testing Schedule," <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/schedules/2021/ei-test-schedule21.pdf>.

<sup>206</sup> Smith, Fred. "Welcome Back to Test Insanity: New York State's Ever-Changing Standardized Tests in English and Math Are Here Again." *The New York Daily News*, April 2, 2019. <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-welcome-back-to-test-insanity-20190402-tyu42dirlzcgjgwyhq36sfwx7y-story.html>.

<sup>207</sup> Smith, Fred. "Welcome Back to Test Insanity: New York State's Ever-Changing Standardized Tests in English and Math Are Here Again."

version. Every community is different and has its own issues. Although some issues extend past community lines, the hierarchical system currently in place prevents the issues from getting attention, instead keeping them submerged at the bottom of the food chain. The City has to give community boards the autonomy to focus on their own needs and issues as opposed to providing a blanket solution.

Much uproar has surrounded the De Blasio administration's idea of abandoning the specialized high school exam. Unsurprisingly, those who protest against the idea are the very ones who benefitted the most from the exam, specifically Asians and whites. The matter of the fact is that the exam discriminates disproportionately against Hispanic and black students for a myriad of reasons, including poor schooling, zoning regulations, and housing discrimination. Although the Asian students who attend the schools tend to be low income, they still have a number of resources available to them. Unlike Hispanic and black students, Asian students and their families predominantly came to New York City during the 1990s, when the Asian population grew 71 percent.<sup>208</sup> As a result, Asians find themselves scattered across the city, not subjected as harshly to the effects of housing discrimination as black and Hispanic students. Many reside in Queens, which features an array of test prep centers, more so than in the Bronx. Lack of test prep centers is not just limited to privately owned ones. City-owned test prep centers are concentrated in Brooklyn and Queens, "with over a quarter of them springing up in the past four years alone, most notably in the boroughs' Asian enclaves of Flushing [in Queens] and Sunset

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<sup>208</sup> "Census Profile: New York City's Asian American Population." Asian American Federation of New York Census Information Center, n.d. <http://www.aafny.org/cic/briefs/newyorkbrief.pdf>.

Park in Brooklyn.”<sup>209</sup> If the City chooses to stick with the specialized high school exam, it may be able to neutralize some of the discriminatory barriers the test puts up by installing a range of test prep centers for students in low-income neighborhoods such as the South Bronx or Brownsville.

Although protests involving the City’s education department have popped up from time to time, none have reached the level of Freedom Day. Most recently, on December 1, 2019, students from Beacon High School staged a walkout intended to voice their displeasure with the screening required to enter the school. The students believed “that rigid screening procedures have contributed to segregation in the school system.”<sup>210</sup> Similarly, students from both NYC iSchool and Chelsea Career and Technical Education School both staged a walkout in November 2019.<sup>211</sup> Although the students protested in favor of integration, their walkout was especially personal; the two schools shared a building. In spite of sharing that space, NYC iSchool is 41% white and 40% low-income whereas Chelsea Career and Technical Education is 4% white and 80% low-income.<sup>212</sup> Similar to Beacon, NYC iSchool used screening tactics in admitting students. Chelsea

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<sup>209</sup> Yin, Alice. “Asian Test-Prep Centers Offer Parents Exactly What They Want: ‘Results.’” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/magazine/asian-test-prep-centers-offer-parents-exactly-what-they-want-results.html>.

<sup>210</sup> Shapiro, Eliza. “Beacon High School Is Half White. That’s Why Students Walked Out.” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/02/nyregion/nyc-beacon-high-school-walkout.html>.

<sup>211</sup> Gallagher, Meghan. “The View Inside NYC’s Latest School Segregation Protest: Why Students Walked Out Monday for 1,800 Seconds — and Say They’ll Do It Again Every Week Until De Blasio Acts.” *The 74 Million*, November 18, 2019.

<https://www.the74million.org/the-view-inside-nycs-latest-school-segregation-protest-why-students-walked-out-monday-for-1800-seconds-and-say-theyll-do-it-again-every-week-until-de-blasio-acts/>.

<sup>212</sup> Gallagher, Meghan. “The View Inside NYC’s Latest School Segregation Protest: Why Students Walked Out Monday for 1,800 Seconds — and Say They’ll Do It Again Every Week Until De Blasio Acts.”

Career and Technical Education did not. The small sample size of the three schools shows that screening affects low-income students of color disproportionately. A student testifies that when schools use screening procedures, they only look at students who come from privilege and take advantage of that privilege.<sup>213</sup> But what is most striking is that although the schools share the common issue of screening, the protests occurred as separate instances. Just as importantly, there is a lack of an adult presence. More current protests seemingly lack the organization and cohesion to arrange a protest on the scale of Freedom Day. The lack of cohesion leads to fractured efforts scattered across the City, as opposed to a singular, amplified protest.

Freedom Day was the cause of a perfect storm. Civil rights activists successfully persuaded parents, students, and teachers all to walk out for integration. Although the plan netted limited success, it's defining feature was the way it brought a group of people together to fight for a singular cause. Freedom Day's spirit and message have been replicated throughout the years, but its scale remains unique to it to this day. Today, students, parents, teachers, and administrators are all cognizant of the segregation in New York's public school system. Yet it does not look like school segregation is going anywhere anytime soon. New York's entrenched patterns of residential segregation have rendered integration close to impossible. As a result, educators and administrators need to look at other solutions. Mayor De Blasio's Renewal plan served as a good foundation, but ultimately, the pressure to show results immediately undid what the program could have done in the future. After all, prior to the program closure, evidence pointed to "the

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<sup>213</sup> "Segregated City." *The Weekly*. The New York Times, October 18, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/18/the-weekly/nyc-schools-segregation.html>.

program having a positive impact... particularly among the most vulnerable students.”<sup>214</sup>

Funding does not necessarily have to go directly to the schools too. Building test prep centers in low-income communities would go a long way towards bridging the gap that currently exists between Asians and other minority students. More importantly, it would negate some of the discriminatory practices that standardized testing, in particular the specialized high school exam, currently maintains. The City can also give students what civil rights activists boycotted for nearly 60 years ago: decentralization. A quote from E. Babbett Edwards, a local Harlemit and civil rights advocate, rings true to this day: “only when ghetto communities are actively involved in the decision-making affecting their disadvantaged schools will there be any progress in advancing equal educational opportunities for black and Spanish-speaking children.”<sup>215</sup> A city as broad and diverse as New York brings its own set of problems that distinguish it from other cities. Each community varies and is distinct from one another. It is part of what makes New York so special. The City must embrace this diversity and reflect it with its education standards. Giving community boards the control they have asked for, while providing support if needed, ensures a fairer educational experience for all children, regardless of race, class, or religion.

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<sup>214</sup> Oppen, Isaac M., William R. Johnston, John Engberg, and Lea Xenakis, Assessing the Short-term Impact of the New York City Renewal Schools Program. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/working\\_papers/WR1303.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1303.html). Page 23

<sup>215</sup> Edwards, E. B. "Additional Letters: Board of Ed." *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Jun 10, 1967. <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/226775610?accountid=10141>.

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