

#50 On the Bus: What One City Can Teach Us About School Desegregation

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack, our topic today is desegregation. It's something we hear about a lot and I notice that inevitably when the topic turns to desegregation, there's a kind of helplessness that seems to come over people. I've even heard people who have some influence say things like, well, you know, we lack the policy levers to really do anything about our segregated schools.

Schneider: And the other side of that conversation is often a defensive one where people will counter saying similar things, but rationalizing non-action and explaining away some of the failures in terms of school desegregation efforts.

Berkshire: Well I thought it would be really interesting to go back some distance in the past and take a deep dive into a period in which very clear things were being done about segregated schools. And I am talking of course about court-ordered desegregation plans.

Schneider: It's interesting that, you know, we don't have to go back that far in time. We don't need to go back all the way to the 1950's to talk about court ordered desegregation plans, that actually this is work that continued through the 1960's and 1970's and in some places there were even still the remnants of it in the 1980's despite the fact that the Supreme Court had already delivered some major setbacks to the movement.

Berkshire: Well, I'm glad to hear you say that because we're actually going back to the 70's—to the mid 70's. And of course, you know, I have been reluctant to share with our listeners how it is that I know this time period so well.

Schneider: It seems Jennifer, like you are asking permission, and you know you don't need to, to use the time machine. And so I'm just going to hand the keys over to you and you can strap your roller skates on and grab your Walkman and take it back.

[Music]

Berkshire: In August of 1977, when I was 10 years old—please don't do the math—I climbed aboard a school bus that took me from my almost entirely white neighborhood in Springfield, Illinois to an overwhelmingly black neighborhood on the other side of town to attend fifth grade. And that's pretty much the end of the story. I had no idea that I was part of an ambitious and court-mandated attempt to do something about the city's segregated schools. In fact, it wasn't until I moved to Boston as an adult that I learned that busing was 'a thing.' If there'd been protests or controversy in Springfield, I never knew anything about them.

Fast forward a few decades and at a time when schools are resegregating, I wanted to learn more about what did and didn't happen in my hometown in hopes of gaining some new perspective. And so I did what I always do when I'm embarking on a big new project. I went looking for an expert.

Will Stancil: My name is Will Stancil. I am a researcher at the University of Minnesota and I focused on civil rights and schools and housing and segregation.

Berkshire: Will has learned a lot about the history of desegregation efforts, especially the ones in places like Springfield that didn't get a lot of attention.

Stancil: The dirty secret of busing is that in a lot of place it worked, and it was not resisted as heavily as the popular imagination suggests. In a lot of places it was undertaken with sort of minimal resistance or no resistance at all.

Berkshire: I put Will on the spot and asked him to sum up what happened in Springfield and why he thinks Illinois' capital city didn't see the kind of protests that flared up elsewhere.

Stancil: Springfield agreed to desegregate, but then there was a kind of a court case over how it would happen. What the school district wanted to do was essentially take the primarily Black schools from the center of the city and integrate them into the neighboring schools, which were working class white schools. And the judge said you couldn't do that. The judge said 'instead what we're going to do is sort of divide the city into quadrants and each quadrant is going to include schools that are primarily Black, working class White schools, and more affluent White schools. And they're all going to have to sort of integrate each other.' I think that that probably has a lot to do with why busing in Springfield was a lot more stable than the other places.

Berkshire: As I started digging into the history, though, I discovered that there was a little more to Springfield's desegregation story. It actually started a couple of years prior to the court order we just heard about, when a school located right in the heart of a housing project in the city's downtown had to be closed because the roof was caving in. Those students, 80 percent of whom were Black, were bused to schools in White neighborhoods and some of those White parents did protest. Theresa Haley, who's now the head of the Springfield and the Illinois NAACP was one of the kids who was bused.

Theresa Haley: They had closed down Palmer Elementary School, which was right in the middle of the John Hay Homes project and decided that they were going to bus us across town. So they sent us to Hay Edwards School and when I got there, the parents were standing outside with picketing signs that said, 'go to the zoo.' We don't want you here. And as a little kid being naive, I didn't know what that meant. I remember saying to my bus monitor, her name was Juanita Adams, I said: Miss Adams, they said go to the zoo! Are we going to the zoo? You know, so I'm excited about the opportunity. I'm thinking 'the first day of school, we don't have to

go to school, we get to go to the zoo.' But they were being racist and they were protesting the fact that you had taken these little Black kids out of the housing project and we were being bused over to their school.

It did get better. The teachers were fairly nice, but you could tell a lot of them were scared or even uncomfortable themselves because they hadn't dealt with so many minority children, let's say Black children, because that was the predominant group that was being bused over to Hay Edwards Elementary School.

Berkshire: There were lots of stories like Theresa's from that first year of busing. Ida Jackson was one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit that was about to force the city to take more comprehensive action. And her kids were also bused to schools in white neighborhoods. She argues that the white parents who were initially so resistant acted that way because he thought that's how they were supposed to act. She gave this interview a few years ago as part of an oral history project about race in Springfield.

Ida Jackson: What we really didn't understand as parents, you know, was why it was only the east side being bused and not the west side because it seemed like it was just done backwards. you know, at that time. [Cross talk with interviewer] It took a while because the kids were mistreated at those schools, because they were laughed at and jeered at because at that time the Boston schools were trying to integrate at the same time and they saw a bunch of stuff on TV and everything. I think people almost began to mimic what they saw other people doing without even thinking that one day the ones that you produce are going to be some problem. folks.

Berkshire: It's easy to see how stories like this could be used to make the case that desegregating the schools was impossible, but that wasn't how advocates like Jackson or the attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in the Springfield desegregation case saw things at all. By closing down a school and putting students on a bus to attend school elsewhere, the school board had shown that transportation couldn't be used as an excuse for inaction. In other words, Theresa Haley had ridden a bus to attend school in the part of town where I lived and that meant the kids in my neighborhood could do the same thing.

Roger Bridges: Everybody attended their local school as a kindergartner and then at some point in their elementary experience. But at another point, everybody at a certain grade level from that elementary district would be bused to another school within the same quadrant. So it meant that if you lived in West Grand and you made a friend from a Black school, you would be going to school with that person for at least five years.

Berkshire: That was Roger Bridges, one of 26 plaintiffs in the desegregation case and an architect of the plan that Springfield eventually implemented. He was talking there to Illinois Public Radio. The plan, one of several that was hotly debated in the months after a federal judge forced the school district to act, was both incredibly complicated and really simple. In

order to eliminate so-called racially identifiable schools, Springfield had to move kids around the city. So on August 26, 1977, I took a bus from Springfield southwest side to the north east part of town to attend Iles Elementary School. Iles was one of the schools named in the lawsuit and now it was going to be a fifth and sixth grade center whose demographics reflected the district.

Mrs. Lape: What I remember mostly is at the end of the school year before I had to move—and I use those words, ‘I had to move.’ We were not excited about it as teachers because we had no choice. I taught fifth grade and fifth grade teachers had to go to Iles.

Berkshire: That was Mrs. Lape, my fifth grade teacher. When the city reconfigured its schools, it wasn't just the students who got moved around, but the teachers too. Mrs. Lape and her colleague, Mrs. Pringle, had been teaching at a school close to where I lived and now they were headed across town too.

Mrs. Lape: We didn't know anybody, I mean she and I knew each other. And the other, however many other teachers there were —probably about 15 or 16 teachers total. We did not know the others. We did not know the principal. We did not know the building. It was an old building, I don't know if you remember how old it was.

Berkshire: I do remember that it was an old building. It was an old building then.

Mrs. Lape: The staff that went to Iles really worked together to make it work, and I think once we got there we decided that it was going to work.

Berkshire: Mrs. Lape stayed at Iles until she retired in the 1990's, but her mentioned that Iles was an old building is important. The debate over desegregation in Springfield really wasn't about good schools versus bad schools, but about the inequitable distribution of resources. Sandberg, where Mrs. Lape and her colleague taught before had a brand new building, while the so called racially identifiable schools were falling apart. Reorganizing the schools was also about redistributing resources.

The desegregation order did something else essential too. It required that every school have a minimum number of black teachers. Here's Theresa Haley again.

Haley: So being a little poor Black kid and seeing Black teachers who were successful, who were helping other children to get good grades and telling them that they were smart and that they were pretty and they could be whatever they wanted to be—those were the kind of encouraging things that we all need.

Berkshire: Haley still has a vivid memory of her favorite teacher: Mrs. Harley.

Haley: She was a young Black teacher from Birmingham, Alabama. She wore red shoes, a red dress, red lipstick and red nail polish and when I grew up I wanted to be just like her because

she was so jazzy. And I remember telling her 'when I grow up, I'm going to move across the street from you.' Because they lived over in Westbrook Apartments. They had a swimming pool. They had tennis courts and she's like, 'oh, little girl, go somewhere and sit down.' Guess what? I grew up, got married, and I moved across the street from her.

Berkshire: As I read and talked to people about Springfield's desegregation experiment, I was struck again and again by how much the debate has changed since the 1970's. Words that we hear so much today, like "access," "opportunity," and "achievement" barely showed up back then. Whereas you heard a lot about how important it was for kids to have friends of different races and different backgrounds. Theresa Haley and I both made friends we would never have met were it not for busing.

Haley: I made such White friends that I didn't see color, I just saw the people. We were kids. We were playing, we were having fun. I remember my mother letting me stay all night with a white girl who lived right by Hay Edwards. They were from Kentucky and I don't know where she is. If I could find her today... Her name was Tacey Ryan. Like Tracy, but it was 'Tacey.' And I've tried since we've been adults, I tried to find her on Facebook and everything and I can't find her.

Berkshire: If you go by the numbers, desegregation in my hometown worked. Springfield went from having schools that were deeply segregated, to having schools that look more like the city, and it exposed kids to a world outside of their own neighborhoods.

Haley: The deseg act was a good thing. I think it helped a lot of children and it hurt a few children. So if it helped the majority of the kids, I think it was a good thing because it allowed me and other Black children to interact with White children and people that we didn't see on a regular basis.

Berkshire: But just sending kids to school together didn't necessarily mean that our school experience was the same. Theresa and I went to high school together, but when she listed her favorite teachers, I hadn't had any of them. And moving kids to different schools couldn't overcome the fact that our neighborhoods were still segregated and unequal.

Haley: I tried out for volleyball and I made volleyball. I was so excited about being on the volleyball team and this is when they were first starting to have after school buses to take kids home, but my bus would not take me home because I lived in the John Hay Homes and the bus driver was scared to come there. So they would drop me off like four or five blocks from home. That was still dangerous for a little girl to get dropped off that far away from home and have to walk, but if I wanted to be on the volleyball team, then that's what I had to do.

And then finally my mother said, 'this is not going to work.' You cannot play volleyball anymore. So she pulled me from that, and that was very, very painful for me—as a kid who was a part of the deseg act, who went to a school who found herself, who got comfortable, who made friends

and was good at a sport but could not continue it because my mother did not have transportation.

Berkshire: In 2009, education scholar Amy Stuart Wells wrote a book based on interviews with students who went through court-ordered school desegregation, and what she found was a lot like this story. That desegregation often had a powerful impact on the lives of individuals, but it didn't demolish the structures of inequity. These days, Wells is closely involved in one of the most watched efforts to tackle school segregation, in New York City.

I asked her about something I noticed again and again in my research into Springfield's story, that while many of the same problems loom today, our vision of what's possible seems to have shrunk dramatically during the past four decades.

Amy Stuart Wells: We were a much more equal society. We weren't as stratified as we are now, by class in particular, you know, where everybody's fighting for a few spots at the top. So there was just a bigger sense, a broader sense of opportunity, period. So now the educational system reflects the anxiety in the society that there are only a few spots at the top and everybody else is, you know, pretty much in trouble, because we have this huge income inequality. So it's really a problem.

Berkshire: A huge thanks to everyone who helped me with this episode, including my personal historian for all things Springfield. Thanks Dad! And Jack and I will be right back with a few final thoughts.

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Berkshire: So Jack, how did you enjoy your extended visit to Springfield, Illinois in the 70's?

Schneider: You know, I actually enjoyed it more than my most recent visit to Springfield, Illinois, which consisted primarily of rubbing Abe Lincoln's metallic nose, which has been buffed to a deep shine. You're agog right now at the fact that this must be true based on my knowledge. It is true. I have been to Springfield.

Berkshire: There are obviously a whole bunch of things that have really changed in the years since Springfield and many other communities enacted these court-ordered deseg plans. One would be that there wasn't the same climate of austerity. There wasn't the sense that opportunity was rationed. And the other thing was that it was pre NCLB, and now I'm really dating myself, right? There simply was not the same understanding that school quality was a thing that could be measured and also that if somebody gained access to what they call a high quality seat now it meant that somebody else had to give it up.

Schneider: It's interesting that you mentioned NCLB and data because, you know, I actually suspect that the narrow range of available data has exacerbated segregation. This is something

we've talked about on this show before, that the idea of rationing is in many ways justified by the prevalence of test score data, which seems to indicate that there are only some good schools out there and that the rest of them are below average, and that some of them are abysmal. When in fact research indicates that student standardized test scores, when we're looking at proficiency rates, are actually telling us more about out-of-school variables. And so really what we learn is that there are some schools with very highly privileged populations out there, many schools with, you know, a sort of mix or a or a sort of average level of advantage. And then there a number of schools, many schools in fact, with highly-concentrated levels of disadvantage. The fact that we talk about schools as if they are good or bad rather than being populated by students with more or less access to resources and institutional advantage that actually really exacerbates the belief that parents have to compete against each other for good schools.

And of course if they do, then some parents are going to be best positioned to win that competition. Parents who have the greatest access to mortgages, right?, because so many schools are in cities and towns where there are no apartments for rent and who have the money to plunk down a deposit either for an apartment or for a home.

Berkshire: Well, I knew you were going to say that, Jack, and actually you are not alone in that sentiment. I played some tape in the episode from Amy Stuart Wells and she made a very similar argument that I saved so that I can spring it upon you now, which is basically that we've ended up with this system where inequity is baked into it and that, you know, people actually hate it, that even the people who benefit from it aren't happy with what they've ended up with—the kids are miserable.

And she made a strong case that we need to basically junk the whole thing down to the kind of perception of school quality that you spend so much time focused on. So I thought that that might be a perfect topic for us as we venture into the weeds as we do every episode for our Patreon subscribers. I thought, wouldn't it be fun to put Jack Schneider on the spot and get him to describe what he would do if he had the chance to really tackle this issue in a way that's not beholden to a system of judging schools that that everyone agrees is so limited.

Schneider: I hope I'm going to have time to take some notes before we began recording that section of the episode, but I'm ready.

Berkshire: That's between you, me and our audience of millions. So as our regular listeners know, we now rely on your support through Patreon, and our supporters get to listen to an extended play episode that we refer to as 'going into the weeds.'

Schneider: All you have to do to join that party is to go to Patreon.com and search for Have You Heard, and of course for those with less access to capital, you can also support the show by going on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts and giving us a rating. Or you can show your love for the show by going on Twitter and sharing it with your friends and colleagues. And

you can include @haveyouheardpod on that. And whoever runs our twitter account will certainly weigh in with a series of bon mots.

Berkshire: So Jack, speaking of bon mots, you better get your notes cracking because we're headed into the weeds. For everyone else, we will be back in a couple of weeks with another episode of Have You Heard.

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