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Our Communities are in Crisis

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ARTICLE

Our Communities are in Crisis

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Busing, controlled choice, and racial tiebreaking have proven to be band-aid initiatives that do not address the much deeper and decades' long issues of segregated housing practices, imbalanced property tax allocations, and deep-pocketed booster clubs that have disproportionately funded some of our schools. In the early 1970's, the Seattle School District initiated a mandatory busing policy for the purpose of integrating students district wide. In the late 80's, the District augmented mandatory busing by instituting a controlled student choice program that allowed parents to select schools within a limited grouping of options. By the late 90's, Seattle halted its practice of mandatory busing, and implemented a racial tiebreaking initiative for over-subscribed schools, where more students than seats are available at a particular school during the application process of open-enrollment. These approved policies over the last 30 years have estranged many of our families from their neighborhood schools and consequently have created another set of problems that lead to further difficulties in creating successful schools for ALL.

Franklin High School is an urban comprehensive school, situated between the central and south ends of the Seattle School District. The school is roughly comprised of 1500 students, 90% of them of color, and over 50% of them eligible for free and reduced lunch. From my perspective as an Assistant Principal, in my 5th year at Franklin, 10th year working with the school district, and 37th year as a Seattle native, busing, controlled choice, and racial tiebreaking policies have accelerated the disparity of separate and unequal communities across the city. Our communities are now in crisis. *How could we allow this to happen? How can we continue to allow it to happen?*

Effects of Policies on Parent Involvement in Schools

The attempts of the Seattle School District to balance student demographics across schools have led to unintended consequences for the students and their families of our citywide neighborhoods. These policy-driven actions have boosted the degrees of separation of our schools from our neighborhood families. Deep-rooted dilemmas are particularly evident in our meager PTSA participation numbers. Busing has divided our neighborhood families and decreased our capacity to engage our parents, guardians and care givers of our students. Over the last five years at Franklin, I have witnessed the anguish on the faces of our half a dozen active parents that carry the weight of a PTSA student body of 1500. It has been the same few parents year after year that run the monthly PTSA meetings, write the newsletters to inform the school community, reward the staff with food and gifts, attend academic, athletic, and artistic performances, help with orientations, and manage senior graduation night, to name a few of their volunteer efforts within the academic school year. I vividly recall my first couple of years attending the PTSA monthly meetings to dialogue on the reform efforts of the school with the parent body. The PTSA would reserve our large meeting room that could hold 100+ people, and we would end up circling up the 10 chairs for the folks that came to discuss and take an active role in the decision making processes of the school. Sadly, there was unsatisfactory participation during a critical time of transformation when parents' voices were essential to the changes that would ultimately impact their children. The research indicates that there is a convincing correlate between family involvement and improved academic performance for the learner. If we had one parent or guardian of every student just volunteer one day a year at Franklin, we could average, at a minimum, eight additional caring, nurturing and learning family members in the building every day of school. Wow! At the very least, it would be a daily statement to the children and staff that there is a community of

adults here that are willing, caring and present. *Does busing really support stability and long-term advocacy?*

Effects of Policies on the Transitory Nature of Students

Busing has promoted transient placements and reinforced a district culture of continuous short-term associations. Franklin enrolls students from every middle, alternative and high school in the system. These enrollment patterns have increased the problem of understanding the individual learner's needs, cultural heritage, and family support structures because there is a lack of curriculum alignment, student assessment information, and ongoing communication with the forwarding institutions. Our district lacks a congruent and frequent data collection system across all schools, aligned to benchmarks, curricula, and professional development. As a result, a district wide professional development plan that impacts instruction and student achievement across all K-12 classrooms is fragmented, idiosyncratic, and isolated. negatively influencing a school's capacity to accelerate student success and support student needs. *We can't teach what we, and whom we, don't know.*

Our lack of bonding between students, staff, families, and communities has resulted in superficial sometimes distrustful relations among us. Consequently, learning remains content driven, not student-centered, not process-oriented, not cumulative and not culturally responsive and inclusive. Often, the student can appear apathetic, uninterested, and self-destructive in this type of learning environment. Spending limited time with one another is counterintuitive and counterproductive to the natural process of broadening personal relationships and bridging cultural awareness. In many instances, just as our relationships are beginning to form and barriers to understanding are breaking down, our students are transitioned off to another class, school, district, or drop out all together. We are recycling patterns of superficiality among students and stakeholders, and conditioning them to accept these forms of shallowness. Consequently, this system escalates cultural insensitivity and adds barriers to creating community closeness.

These weak relationships have encouraged the formation of cliques among the student body, where friends are now the pseudo-family, often referred as their 'cousins.' Most often then not, these cliques appear to be racially and/or ethnically centered. During the break and lunch hours, the White students are outside on the steps or across the street on the grass, the Black students are outside by the Keys or inside near the foyer and senior bench, the East Africans are in the Commons, the Samoans are in the back by the flagpole, the Latino students are in the back hallway on the first floor near the bilingual classrooms, and the Asian students are outside of the Counseling office on the second. These racial and ethnic formations illustrate a student-initiated segregated school within a school. *Why? Because this is where they feel safe, and these are their 'new' families for now.*

Most of these students have not spent their kindergarten through high school years growing up with one another, and have difficulty seeing past their racial identities. They may rely on these superficial constructions for comfort, not realizing that they may be perpetuating societal patterns of prejudices, stereotypes, and a host of ignominious 'isms. Student assignments that have displaced students out of their home areas have restricted our system's ability to understand a student's capabilities, characteristics, and capacities to learn, to think, to know. Consequently, the school staff has difficulty understanding the learner and his or her 'story'. In the end, the severed connections between learner, school and community does not embrace long-term advocacy, and does not produce winning outcomes for ALL. The transient nature of the school connections may offer a partial explanation for the large number of students of color being placed in remedial courses or being labeled with disabilities or being referred for disciplinary actions. They may partially explain students' truancy, failure on standardized tests, struggles to meet graduation requirements, settling for a G.E.D, or dropping out. This is unacceptable.

Effects of Policies on Student and Family Involvement

Overall student involvement in extracurricular activities declined years ago. With seventeen different sport programs, we have difficulty either outfitting a varsity or junior varsity squad for all sports except basketball. Active clubs are down to a handful, and fundraising is practically non-existent. Busing has reinforced the notion that the schoolhouse shuts down at 2:30pm. As the buses leave, you can watch the mass exodus of students being transported in varied directions across the city. We have limited our capacity to build after-school activities -- athletic, artistic and academic programs to enhance a student's repertoire of life skills. A schoolhouse closer to family and neighborhood makes it easier for students and their parents, guardians, or family members to use the school's resources, trainings, and events. Busing across the city takes two or three bus transfers and an hour or more; driving across the city from south to north half an hour or more. And the inflexibility in job schedules, the limited time and transportation options, along with family needs, widen the barriers for family involvement in the schools and in their children's educational progress.

During students' high school experience, it is imperative, especially for struggling learners, who may be confused or uninterested in school, to have an advocate take an active lead in their education. They need multiple mentors, especially a family caregiver, to further their development and reinforce strong study habits, to help them understand classroom practices and teacher expectations, and to take advantage of varied enrichment activities before, during, and after school. High school is 'high stakes' for our children today. Predictable patterns of the 'haves versus have-nots' begin to form during high school, and are further exacerbated through limited post-secondary options and finite seat capacities in post-secondary institutions. High school is the most **serious** time of accountability for our children, it is the most **critical** time for caregivers to take an active role in their child's learning, and it is the **only** time where credits, grades, rigorous courses, test scores, references, and cumulative files are scrutinized for acceptance or denial into next step opportunities.

Who really benefits and who is burdened from busing?

I would argue that White students are the primary benefactors of busing, and students of color have predominately been burdened through the application of this program. Most often, students of color are being bused to White neighborhoods and out of their local communities. There appears to be more of an effort to broaden a White student's awareness, instead of raising the quality of education for the schools servicing majority students of color. In Seattle, this takes shape when south end students of color are bused to the White suburbs of the north end. In addition, Seattle has 25% of its school-aged white children attending private institutions, the highest percentage of 'white-flight' in the nation. There is a distinct *de facto* economic and racial divide stratified by the Lake Washington Ship Canal Bridge. Aggregately, south end schools have been under-prescribed, under-resourced, and under-served, producing an unhealthy climate of competition over scarce educational resources and enrollments that determine school budgets. As schools feel the fiscal impact of dwindling student enrollments, fear can manifest into hostility within the school staff, as they attempt to save programs and personnel from the chopping block. The under-enrolled and over-enrolled schools; as you travel south to north in the district, exacerbate the inequalities across the city and disproportionately impact our south end communities. It is the district leaders' responsibility to balance the system, buffer schools from extreme hardships, support school leaders, and provide adequate funding, resources, and professional support to meet the distinctive needs of a school community. Our schooling system of fleeting staff and students greatly limits the capacity of school leadership to build sustainable change, particularly when the change agents and the recipients of the change efforts are consistently changing. In this setting, predictable patterns are recognizable in the school data. Most often, these schools have higher truancy rates, dropout rates and disciplinary rates, and lower graduation rates, cumulative grade point averages, and college acceptance rates, consistently evident with students of color. For the most

part, these students are left feeling unknown, unsupported and uncared for, yet held more accountable, liable, and responsible for their own learning, a paradoxical predicament for our young learners of today.

What happens when a group of individuals learns to work as a team? Will the results of working together as a team have a greater capacity for success than the sum of the team's individual capabilities? Would you like to send your child to a system of education that fostered and nurtured long-term relationships among students, their families, and their community?

Would it be nice if you and your child knew at the start of kindergarten that they would be graduating with their classmates as a Quaker, a Bulldog, a Viking or a Beaver for instance, and that they would be nurturing life-long relationships throughout their K-12 experience, and beyond? In this setting, do you think it possible for all students to be valedictorians? For all students to graduate with honors? For all students to be accepted into college? For all students to be contributing members of their community and our society at large?

Busing and racial-tiebreaking are 'policies of distraction' that have resulted in limiting our capacities to imagine something different. The transient and intermittent nature of student placements have obstructed the opportunities for staff and district stakeholders to build a sustainable system that supports learners' needs and growth through long-term advocacy. In addition, the costs incurred in transporting students from their neighborhood schools have diverted funds that could have been used to enhance student offerings, services and resources, build aligned curricula and assessments across grade levels, or improve system wide instructional practices to accelerate student achievement.

It takes time, effort, and dialogue to build trust and true understanding among one another.

A good schooling system is like a good coach. A good coach knows each of their players inside and out, knows their family support systems, knows how and when to provide support and encouragement to each individual player, moves players to their strengths, challenges players to work through their obstacles and areas of weakness, and builds a team of players that support and serve one another. We have created a system of deception that has led us astray. Our need to transform the model of public education must be our paramount priority as a public citizenry. We need to re-build our human community. We need a new vision for public schooling that believes all children can achieve and contribute to our local community and our global humanity. This new vision does NOT hold students solely accountable and does NOT accept student failure. Our children will continue to suffer in this historically rooted system of miseducation, if we, the primary stakeholders, do NOT demand something different. We must provide excellence in our advocacy for every child or our communities will continue to remain in crisis and our children will continue to be the recipients of this failing model.

One final thought; *"Has busing limited our imagination to create something different for our children?"*