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# Was It A Forced Choice? Student Experiences in Project Concern and METCO

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Dana Banks, '03

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Educ 399 Independent Study

## **Was It A Forced Choice?**

### **Student Experiences in Project Concern and METCO**

Desegregating public schools has been a problem that has affected cities and suburbs nationwide. Since 1974, in *Milliken v. Brady*, when the Supreme Court ruled that suburbs cannot be forced to participate in a city's desegregation plan, mandatory desegregation programs have become hard to achieve (Eaton 9). For urban school districts, who had only a small amount of white students and even that was shrinking, racial integration was nearly impossible (Eaton 10). The ruling in *Milliken* seemed to guarantee that as whites continued to move into the suburbs, poor urban schools would remain predominantly filled with minority students (Eaton 10). Civil rights lawyers and advocates of educational equality continue to search for remedies to the increasing inequality and racial segregation that many urban schools face today (Eaton 10). Many cities are currently turning to an alternative to mandatory desegregation programs, choice busing programs. These programs appear to be fairly successful, possibly because they truly attempt to combine desegregation and quality education (Eaton 13).

This study draws upon transcripts of oral history interviews with Project Concern alumni to ask whether "choice" programs were actually forced choice programs, meaning whether that alumni only said that they would repeat the busing experience due to a lack

of quality educational options in their city. Project Concern was a voluntary city-to-suburb school desegregation busing program in the Hartford region from 1966 to 1998. The program consisted primarily of busing predominantly African American and Latino urban youths to predominantly white suburban schools. This study argues that a majority of Project Concern alumni interviewed responded that the program was a forced choice, which colors their response to whether or not they would repeat the Project Concern experience. In addition, the study's second purpose is to question the conclusion that Susan Eaton raised in her book, The Other Boston Busing Story, that nearly all the adults represented would repeat their experience in the Metropolitan Council for Education Opportunity (METCO), a similar busing program in Boston. This study suggests that if Eaton had fully addressed the "forced choice" issue when analyzing her interviews, she might have concluded that a majority of her respondents only said that they would repeat the METCO program because of a lack of quality educational options available in Boston.

This study will draw from 24 interviews with Project Concern alumni, out of which, there were 9 males and 15 females, 6 respondent who graduated in the 1970's, 7 who graduated in the 1980's, 5 who graduated in the 1990's, 5 who didn't graduate with the program, and 1 who didn't respond. Also, there were 10 suburbs represented in the study; West Hartford, Plainville, Manchester, Glastonbury, Farmington, Wethersfield, Newington, New Britain, Simsbury, and Suffield. The alumni were selected from lists provided by the former director of Project Concern, Mary Carroll, and a process of chain-referrals. 10 of the interviews that are being used were previously collected and transcribed by Professor Jack Dougherty's Education 308 class, Cities, Suburbs, and

Schools. These respondents were taken from a list drawn up by Mary Carroll, who attempted to find former Project Concern students who were living in the Hartford area, so that it would not be difficult for the student and the alum to meet for the interview. Each of the 9 students was given the name of an alum from the list provided by Ms. Carroll, and they were each responsible for interviewing that alumni and transcribing the interview. The first interview was conducted by the entire class, so that interview questions could be tested and the students could be introduced to the interview process. The other 14 interviews have been conducted and transcribed by myself and another student doing a similar study, Lauren Gutmann. Lauren and I began with any of the alums that we had on our list that had not been interviewed by the class. Mary Carroll also provided us with 18 more names that were, once again, based solely on the criteria that they lived in the Hartford area. Throughout the interview process, each respondent was also asked if they knew anyone who would be interested in being interviewed for our study. This allowed us to collect more names of alumni. We interviewed anyone who was interested, without regard to age, gender, socioeconomic status, education level or which Project Concern School they had graduated from. We did however keep a chart of all of the individuals who were called, interviewed or declined to be interviewed, so that we could keep track of who had been contacted. We also kept the same interview questions throughout the entire interview process, which prevented confusion or questions being catered to fit our individual research questions. We developed a policy that neither of us would mention the purpose of our studies or our research questions to the respondents prior to the interview, so that the respondents' answers could not be influenced by what we were studying. All the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2

hours long and all were conducted in person, except for one that was conducted over the phone. The interviews were also all tape recorded and transcribed and were conducted at locations that had selected by the respondents, usually at the respondent's home or place of work.

This study examines the different narrative patterns in the responses, specifically when the respondents were asked the question of whether or not they would repeat the Project Concern experience, and where it applies, whether or not they would send their children to a program that is similar to Project Concern. Based on their responses to these questions, the respondents were grouped into three categories: those who replied yes, they would definitely repeat the Project Concern experience, those who replied that they would, but expressed doubts and concerns, and those who replied that they would not repeat the experience. The respondents' answers were then analyzed to see if the respondent states or implies that they felt that Project Concern was a forced choice. For the purposes of this study, a forced choice was defined as the respondent stating or implying that they would repeat their Project Concern experience because of a lack of quality educational options in Hartford. For example, Respondent J, a male who graduated from Hall High School in West Hartford, when asked whether he would repeat the Project Concern experience, answered, "Most definitely, again, I think it was definitely... going back to the same time frame I would go back through it...I think I was offered more than... I could be offered going through the schooling system." Therefore, Respondent J was classified as a respondent who saw Project Concern as a forced choice. Each respondent, after being grouped into the three groups based on their responses to whether they would repeat the Project Concern experience, was then

grouped into two additional categories, whether they implied that Project Concern was a forced choice, or did not imply that Project Concern was a forced choice. The results of their responses are shown in the table below:

	<b>Implied a Forced Choice</b>	<b>Did Not Imply a Forced Choice</b>	<b>Total Responses</b>
<b>Answered Yes</b>	5	4	9 (37%)
<b>Answered Yes, But Expressed Doubts</b>	8	3	11 (46%)
<b>Answered No</b>	4	0	4 (17%)
<b>Total Responses</b>	17 (70%)	7 (30%)	24 (100%)

Out of the 24 Project Concern alumni interviews, 20 participants (83%) answered that, if they could go back in time, they would repeat the Project Concern experience. However, a closer examination of the answers to this question shows that only 9 respondents actually answered yes without expressing any concerns or doubts about the program. These respondents will be referred to as the “9 definite repeaters.” In fact, the “9 definite repeaters” were the only respondents that answered the question in an entirely positive manner. For example, Respondent A, a female who graduated from Mary Immaculate Academy in New Britain, simply answered the question by saying, “Yes I would, and I would do a whole lot better in school than I did.” Similarly, Respondent B, a female who graduated from Simsbury High School, not only stated that she would definitely repeat the Project Concern experience, she also said that “I would not change a thing.” Therefore, as these responses show, 9 out of the 24 (37%) respondents have no doubts whatsoever that they would indeed repeat the Project Concern experience.

It is not surprising that 4 out of the “9 definite repeaters” (45%) who stated that they would definitely repeat the Project Concern experience, also did not mention or even imply that Project Concern was a forced choice. This could probably be attributed to the fact that all four of these respondents saw Project Concern as such a positive experience. Their positive recollection may have made it more difficult for them to recognize the lack of educational opportunities that were available at the time. However, it is also important that 5 out of the “9 definite repeaters” (55%) still mentioned or implied in their interviews that they felt that Project Concern was a forced choice. This is surprising, because even though these respondents recalled their experiences in almost an entirely positive manner, they still mentioned that their willingness to repeat the Project Concern experience is due to a lack of educational opportunities available in Hartford. For example, Respondent B mentioned that she was actually considering moving to the suburbs so that her kids could get a better education before she realized that Project Concern was still available. She stated, “I was thinking of moving to Simsbury or even West Hartford, because that is where I was thinking of buying houses so my children could attend school... but when he got accepted to this program, we bought a home in Hartford.” Similarly, Respondent C, a female who dropped out of Timothy Edwards in South Windsor before graduation, when asked if she would repeat the Project Concern experience, stated, “Yes, I would. Instead of going to Hartford schools? Yes! I would, I really would.” These responses show that even some of the respondents who would definitely repeat the Project Concern experience would do so because they feel that Project Concern offers a better educational opportunity than the Hartford schools.

11 respondents also responded that they would repeat the Project Concern experience if they had to go back in time, however, these respondents expressed doubts and concerns in their answers. These respondents will be referred to as the “11 ambivalent repeaters.” For example, Respondent D, a female who graduated from Conrad High School in West Hartford, said that she would “certainly” participate in Project Concern, but then she went on to say,

I hesitate when I say that because I, I, sometimes read some of the news from Hartford and there are so many students from Hartford High and from Weaver that go on to do some great things. So, it’s hard to say whether or not if I had stayed in the Hartford school system, if I would have had the support to have the opportunities that I had.

This shows that Respondent D still has doubts as to whether Project Concern was more beneficial than public school would have been. Respondent E, a male who graduated from Newington High School, when asked the same question, expressed that although he would repeat the Project Concern experiences there was parts of the experience that he didn’t like. He stated,

Oh, yeah. Definitely...but as far as being better, umm... there’s part of the experience that, you know, I don’t like. Where I don’t feel it’s better because, when a lot of kids come from Hartford, they go to the suburban schools, they have so much other things to deal with than just getting an education.

Therefore, Respondent E, also had doubts as to whether Project Concern was better than Hartford Public schools.

It is not surprising that out of these “11 ambivalent repeaters,” 8 (73%) either mentioned or implied that they felt that Project Concern was a forced choice. Many stated that they would only send their children to Project Concern if they couldn’t move to the suburbs. The only 3 respondents from this group who did not mention or imply a



forced choice, their responses were fairly expected because, like the other respondents in the first category who did not address the forced choice issue, their overall view of Project Choice was fairly positive. However, Respondent F, a female who attended West Hartford schools but moved away before graduation, addressed the idea that Project Concern was a forced choice several times in her interview. She responded that she would return to Project Concern if she “had to stay in Hartford as a student.” Also, when asked if she would send her children to a similar program, she discussed how she would rather improve the schools in her own neighborhood than send her children on a long bus ride. She responded that “she would try to improve the schools in Hartford and that other parents should think about doing that too. I believe that the schools could be good and that they just need some help. Then I would definitely, now it’s kind of iffy.”

Respondent F’s comment shows that she sees Project Concern as a forced choice because of the poor state of the Hartford schools. Later in her interview she mentioned what she thinks of the Hartford school system by mentioning, “my children today, wouldn’t be able to cope in a Hartford Public School, they would get eaten alive.” Respondent D also mentioned that Project Concern was a forced choice by stating,

But the perception to us was that the quality of education in Hartford was not anywhere near the quality of education in the suburbs, and that’s why parents were trying to get their children out of cities. And I don’t know how much that’s changed. But that was the reality, at least in our minds, at the time, and probably still is.

Therefore, although all of the “11 ambivalent repeaters” still felt that the overall Project Concern experience was positive and that they would participate again if they could go back in time, most of them still recognized that Project Concern was a forced choice because better educational opportunities were not available.

The final 4 respondents all stated that if they could go back in time they would not repeat the Project Concern experience. These respondents will be referred to as the “4 no repeaters.” However, their responses are interesting because all four of them continued to advocate the program, even though they did not feel that they would want to go through it again. For example, Respondent G, a male who graduated from Plainville High, stated,

Personally speaking, I would rather have went to school in my neighborhood...Just from my viewpoint, not that Project Concern was bad, its just that I won't say that life would be more convenient, but more comfortable probably, if I lived there versus being bused around. Not that busing is a bad thing, just for personal preference.

Here Respondent G is explaining that he feels that Project Concern is a good program, it just wasn't the best option for him. Similarly, when asked whether she would repeat the experience, Respondent H, a female who graduated from Hall High School in West Hartford, answered, “Not in a million years!” However, she then went on to describe her own work with the Capitol Region Educational Council, which runs the Capitol Region Choice Program, the program that is the current version of Project Concern, and her support of the program and its goals. Therefore, although she would not repeat the experience herself, she still sees the benefits of the program. This shows that the issue involved here, is not whether Project Concern is a “good” program. None of the respondents, even those who would not repeat the Project Concern experience, thought that it was a bad program. The issue that arises is that Project Concern appears to be the only educational option.

Not surprisingly, all of the “4 no repeaters,” who stated that they would not repeat the Project Concern experience either stated or implied that Project Concern and programs like it are a forced choice. In fact, Respondent H, blatantly stated that

if you are stuck, as a parent, because you are doing the best you can, as a parent, and you can't put yourself in the neighborhood that you want your kids to go to school in, then you have no choice but to be in the Choice Program!...And for thousands of parents in Hartford, that how they feel. They feel this is, this is not what they want to do, but they want to see their kids have a good education. And, because they feel that the education in Hartford is lacking in a lot of things, this is the best that they can do.”

This shows that Respondent H feels that Hartford parents who cannot afford to move to the suburbs, have little choice but to participate in Project Concern or similar programs. Respondent I, a male who graduated from Suffield High, made a similar point. He stated that, “Would I do it again? I don't think so... now, would I want to stay in the Hartford School system? No. My ideal would be to live in one of these suburban towns and be a part of the community...Project Concern was a forced issue and a lot of people weren't receptive to that.” Here, Respondent I is clearly stating that Project Concern is a forced choice because of a lack of educational options in Hartford. Their responses show that they feel that Project Concern is the only quality educational option that is available to the children of Hartford.

#### Was METCO a Forced Choice?

Susan Eaton, in her book, The Other Boston Busing Story, conducted a study that was similar to mine, that examined the Metropolitan Council for Education Opportunity, the choice busing program that was implemented in Boston. METCO is the “longest continuously running voluntary school desegregation program in the nation... (Eaton 3).” It was founded in 1966 by parents and activists who saw the program as a temporary

remedy to the poor quality of the highly segregated, predominantly black Boston public schools (Eaton 3). Like Project Concern, METCO was a voluntary city-to-suburb program, that consisted of busing minority students from the Boston public schools into the higher performing, predominantly white, suburban schools. Eaton's study concentrated on the experiences of adult former METCO students. She created her sample, of 65 former METCO students, using a process of "chain-referrals," starting with a list of former METCO students names, provided to her by METCO directors, and then being referred to other former METCO students by the respondents she interviewed (Eaton 264-265). She chose her interviews in an attempt to get a variation in age, schools of graduation, socioeconomic status, and equal number of men and women (Eaton 265). Eaton's sample contained 30 men and 35 women, 16 different METCO districts, and a variation of socioeconomic status, age, and education (Eaton 265).

Eaton employed an analysis that is similar to mine to break her participants into categories and form a conclusion based upon their answers to her question about whether or not they would repeat their METCO experience. Essentially, Eaton groups her 65 respondents into four categories; the cheerleaders, who had no complaints about their suburban school experience (Eaton 204-205), the "yes, but," who would repeat the METCO experience if specific conditions were met (Eaton 206), the "I guess I have to," who see METCO as a the only educational option available in Boston (Eaton 212), and the "no going back," who would not return to METCO under any circumstances (Eaton 214). According to Eaton, 12 respondents fell under the cheerleader category (Eaton 204-205), 30 fell within the "yes, but" category (Eaton 206), 14 fell within the "I guess I have to" category (Eaton 212), and 8 people fell within the "no going back" category

(Eaton 214), for a total of 64 responses. Based on this data, Eaton forms the conclusion that, “Remarkably, nearly all the adults represented said that they would indeed repeat their METCO experience... (Eaton 21).” But a closer reading of Eaton’s evidence does not support her claim. This is because Eaton refers to everyone who fell within her first three categories as stating that they would repeat the METCO experience. This does not appear to be the case. Although the cheerleaders would definitely repeat their experience, it doesn’t seem plausible to count everyone who responded, “yes, but” or “I guess I have to,” as people who would definitely repeat the METCO experience. This is important, because it shows that Eaton’s conclusion is not supported by her evidence.

Eaton’s analysis can be easily compared to the analysis in this study, because similar questions were used, which were whether or not the Project Concern or METCO alumni would repeat their city-to-suburb busing experience if they could go back in time. Also, similar categories were used in both studies, Eaton grouping her respondents into cheerleaders, “yes, but,” “I guess if I have to,” and “no going back,” and I grouped my respondents into three similar categories, those who replied yes, those who replied yes but expressed doubts or concerns, and those who replied no. Also, it appears that there could also be a forced choice element that is present within the METCO program, and similar to the situation with the Project Concern experience, it could be coloring the respondents answers to whether or not they would repeat the METCO experience, and it is not being addressed by Eaton. In fact, according to Eaton’s own analysis, it appears that her entire, “I guess if I have to” category, fits into my definition of respondents that see the “choice busing program as a forced choice.” Eaton, herself, describes the group as those respondents who,

in saying they would repeat their experiences and place their children in white suburban schools, nevertheless see METCO as the best choice among inadequate options... These adults commonly complain at length about what they perceive as the low quality of the public schools in Boston and the high cost of private schools in the Boston area... (Eaton 212)

It appears from Eaton's analysis of the responses of the members of this category, that it is possible that these individuals would consider METCO to be a forced choice. Looking at this data, it also appears possible that other respondents could have seen METCO in a similar fashion.

The researcher's selection of categories for interpreting interview data dramatically shapes the results of the study. For example, at the beginning of my study, it appeared that I would be able to say that 83% of the Project Concern participants would repeat their experience, however after a closer narrative analysis, I realized that only 37% of the participants said they would repeat their experience without expressing any doubts or concerns. Therefore, by splitting the respondents who answered that they would repeat the Project Concern into two different categories, the "9 definite repeaters," who had no doubts about repeating the experience, and the "11 ambivalent repeaters," who would probably repeat the experience but expressed doubts and concerns, I realized that these respondents could not be placed under one single category of respondents that would repeat the experience because that would be misleading. However, then I realized that there was a majority of the respondents who expressed disappointment over the quality of education in the Hartford public schools. This led me to realize that my strongest claim was actually that over 70% of the participants stated or implied that Project Concern was a forced choice, and that if more choices had been available, many of the participants would have at least considered other options. Therefore, although the majority of the

participants did say that they would repeat the Project Concern experience, these answers were colored because of a lack of educational opportunities in the city of Hartford.

Similarly, it appears that because of the similarities between Eaton's study and my own, that a forced choice could also be present within METCO, that was not addressed by Eaton.

The significance of this study, is, that if, as my thesis suggests, Project Concern truly is a forced choice that has not been addressed, then, educational options in Hartford, and perhaps Boston, need to be reevaluated. It is necessary for all the public school options, especially in Hartford, to be made high quality options, so that programs, such as Project Concern, are not forced choice programs for the students. The public schools in Hartford need to be improved so that the children have more than just one program to choose from. This study could help policymakers and others who are concerned with and affected by choice busing programs design future desegregation and education plans. This study is also important because it suggests another possibility to the conclusion offered in Susan Eaton's book. It suggests that choice busing really isn't a choice, but a forced choice, and that former students say that they would repeat the experience only because there are no other options available. Therefore, if Project Concern is actually a forced choice, than METCO, which is a similar program could also be a forced choice.

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