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Segregation has soared in America's schools as federal leaders largely looked away

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Students line up for their buses at a district stop near Jefferson High School in Los Angeles on the first day of classes in 2015. In California, 58% of Latinos

attend “intensely segregated schools,” a recent report says. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

Nearly 50 years have passed since Kamala Harris joined the legions of children bused to schools in distant neighborhoods as the United States attempted to integrate its racially segregated public schools.

Yet the consequences of racial and economic segregation remain a fact of daily life for millions of black and Latino children.

Harris’ attack on her Democratic rival Joe Biden over his opposition to federally mandated busing in the 1970s was a rare case of school segregation emerging as a flashpoint in a recent presidential race.

The emotionally raw clash on a Miami debate stage between a black U.S. senator and a white former vice president raised the question of what, if anything, the Democratic candidates would do to promote racial integration of America’s schools.

In the aftermath of the social upheaval wrought by the forced busing of the 1970s, the federal government all but walked away from school desegregation, with only lax enforcement of court-ordered integration and token programs to encourage voluntary desegregation.

“For more than a generation, little has been done to address the issue,” said Gary Orfield, the co-director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. “It is crucial that we act.”

In recent elections, candidates have been largely silent about segregation, a posture that experts say is not surprising given the unease of many Americans with discussions about race and inequity, particularly when it involves their children.

“The scars of the busing era are still pretty deep,” said Bruce Fuller, an education and public policy professor at UC Berkeley.

The effect of segregation is profound. Children in integrated schools are more likely to graduate high school and attend college, and they get jobs with higher incomes, studies show. There is also a societal benefit when young people interact with peers of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, scholars say.

“It’s important to have public schools play a role in helping young people and the broader community develop the capacity and commitment to live together in productive ways,” said John Rogers, director of UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education and Access.

Betsy DeVos, President Trump’s Education secretary, has chipped away at desegregation efforts, which were already a relatively low priority in the Obama administration.

“I would give myself a pretty low grade on that,” President Obama’s former Education Secretary Arne Duncan told the 74, a nonprofit education news outlet, after he left office in late 2015.

The largest current federal effort is a roughly \$100-million competitive grant program for magnet schools that began under President Nixon. By drawing students from diverse neighborhoods, magnet schools play an important role in desegregation.

But civil rights advocates have long called for more action, starting with the repeal of a 1974 section of an education law that bars spending of federal dollars on transportation for the purpose of racial integration.



School busing in Berkeley during Kamala Harris' childhood was both voluntary and volatile

JUN 30, 2019 | 7:20 PM

The federal government could also fund competitive grants for school districts that pursue voluntary desegregation and step up its enforcement of court orders to integrate, said Erica Frankenberg, director of Penn State's Center for Education and Civil Rights.

"It's a really important role the federal government can play to provide political support for local school districts who may want to do it but for various political reasons may find it's a hard lift," she said.

Even though more than 150 school districts across the country are subject to court-ordered desegregation, civil rights groups have not pressed the federal government to return more broadly to the mandatory busing that outraged many parents in the '60s and '70s.

Progress toward school integration stalled in the late 1980s. In the three decades since then, racial and economic segregation has steadily increased. In some parts of the country, including the South, it has returned to levels last seen in the 1960s.

But the nature of the segregation has changed dramatically, due to a surge in the Latino population driven by relatively high birthrates and immigration. Between 1969 and 2016, enrollment of white students in the U.S. dropped by 11 million as that of Latinos increased by the same amount, according to a May report by UCLA and Penn State. Whites remain the largest racial group in public schools, but are no longer the majority.

Now, many black and Latino students attend schools segregated by both race and poverty, the report found. Black children are again increasingly isolated from white and middle-class students, but are also often a minority in majority-Latino schools.



School busing and race tore L.A. apart in the 1970s. Now, Kamala Harris is reviving debate

JUN 29, 2019 | 10:20 AM

In California, 58% of Latinos attend “intensely segregated schools,” the report found. Nationwide, “segregation of Latino students is now the most severe of any group and typically involves a very high concentration of poverty,” the report concluded.

Another fundamental change is the emergence of intense racial segregation in the suburbs. The mandatory busing of the '70s was typically an exchange of students among segregated neighborhoods of large urban school districts. Now, many suburban school districts are islands of segregation. To integrate those districts requires cooperation across school district lines, which the federal government can provide incentives to encourage, experts say.

“The idea that schools would be associated with a geographic area like a neighborhood is anachronistic,” said Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, an expert on school segregation at the University of North Carolina. “We can’t have a 20th century solution to a 21st century problem.”

Though education is largely a state and local matter, the federal government has led the nation’s advances on integration since 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that the segregation of public schools based solely on race was unconstitutional.

“The federal government is not the agency on the ground doing the hard work of making it happen, but the role of federal incentives is huge,” said Philip Tegeler, executive director of the Poverty & Race Research Action Council, a civil rights group. Over the next few years, “the most important thing the federal government can do is provide funding incentives for school integration at the state and local level.”

Candidates in the 2020 presidential race — and many others before — were mostly silent about the issue until Harris raised it in the June 27 debate. The California senator spoke of being bused in the early 1970s from a mainly black neighborhood in Berkeley to an elementary school in a white section of the city as part of a voluntary program. She faulted Biden for opposing federally mandated busing in that era.

But few candidates have put desegregation on their campaign agenda. Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont has proposed higher spending on voluntary busing

and magnet schools and vowed to name judges who would enforce desegregation orders.

He and Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts are cosponsors of legislation that would provide \$120 million in grants for voluntary desegregation. Biden also supports such grants.

Former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julián Castro says his housing policy would decrease segregation. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee has proposed giving \$500 million to needy school districts for integration.

Harris' education plan is focused on increasing teacher pay.



[Joe Biden defends record on busing after Kamala Harris confrontation in debate](#)

JUN 28, 2019 | 1:05 PM

In the days since the debate, Harris and Biden have continued to spar over 1970s busing.

Harris says busing should be one of many tools to desegregate schools, but would not need to be federally mandated unless local officials were blocking

integration. She has continued to criticize Biden for opposing federal busing requirements in the '70s.

“He has yet to agree that his position on this, which was to work with segregationists and oppose busing, was wrong,” Harris told reporters in Iowa on Thursday.

Biden says his position in the 1970s was more nuanced than what Harris has suggested. He says he supported court-ordered busing when districts refused to desegregate. He also says he backed voluntary integration, but not busing mandated by the U.S. Department of Education.

In the past, however, he has denounced racial integration of schools in general as “a racist concept.”

In the days following the debate, Biden repeatedly bristled at being questioned about views he held decades ago rather than his legacy of supporting civil rights and his plans for the future. But on Saturday, speaking to African American voters in South Carolina, Biden apologized for comments he made about working civilly with segregationists in the U.S. Senate.

“Was I wrong a few weeks ago to somehow give the impression to people that I was praising those men who I successfully opposed time and again? Yes, I was. I regret it,” he said. “And I’m sorry for any of the pain or misconception they may have caused anybody.”

The question now, experts say, is whether the sort of political will that advanced school integration in the '70s will reemerge to address the new variations of segregation that affect millions of children today.

“This is not a disease for which there is no known cure,” UC Berkeley economist Rucker Johnson said. “We really do have concrete evidence that school integration can really achieve important impacts for all kids.”

Times staff writer Melissa Gomez contributed to this report.

<https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-2020-school-segregation-busing-harris-biden-20190708-story.html>