

BECOMING US

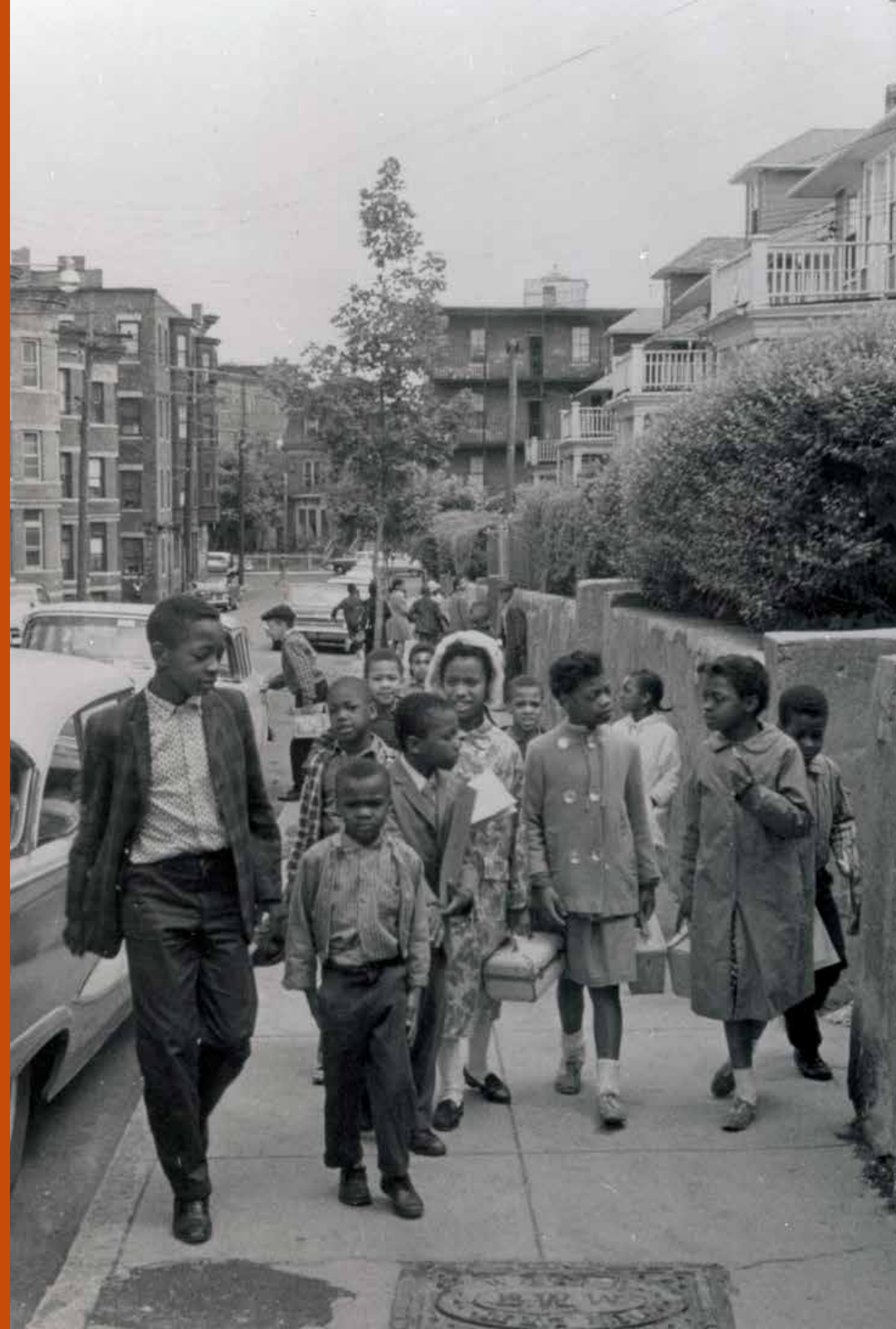
SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL IN 1963

How Can We Provide a Better
Education for Boston's
African American Students?

Student Deliberation Guide



Children from the Boardman School walk down Monroe Street in Roxbury, a predominantly Black neighborhood in Boston, in 1962. Northeastern University Library, Freedom House Photographs, Irene Shwachman Photos.



INTRODUCTION

The year is 1963. The place is Boston, Massachusetts. You are a visitor from today, joining an important conversation. The question under discussion: How can we provide a better education for young African American students in Boston?

The main reason people are concerned about this question is because Boston's public schools are racially divided. Most Black students attend schools where the student body is majority Black. For example, more than 80 percent of Boston's Black elementary students attend majority-Black schools. Most of the city's white students attend majority-white schools.

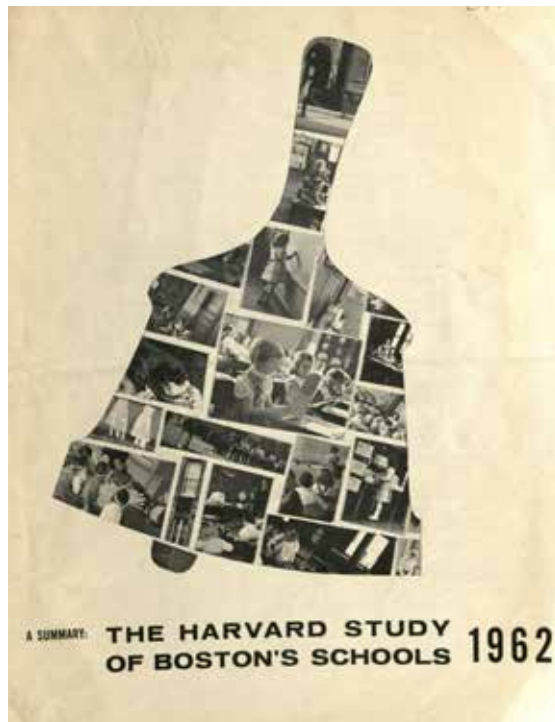
Why is there such a racial imbalance in our schools? Boston is a city that is racially divided by neighborhoods, and most schools reflect the racial makeup of their neighborhoods. These patterns can be traced, in part, to discriminatory federal housing policies, which have made it more difficult for Black people to obtain mortgages. This greatly limits their options and often forces them into lower-quality housing. Federal policies have also encouraged white people to move away from neighborhoods when African American residents start moving in.



Political flyer for Ruth Batson, who ran unsuccessfully for the Boston School Committee in 1951. The popularly elected committee was only composed of white members until the 1970s. Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute.

Racial imbalance in Boston's public schools is also driven by the actions of the city's all-white elected school board, the Boston School Committee (BSC). Although there are no laws requiring segregated schools, critics argue that the BSC makes certain decisions with the goal of maintaining racial separation. For example, the BSC decides which schools students from each Boston neighborhood should attend. When a predominantly Black school becomes overcrowded, Black students are often bused past nearby majority-white schools with vacant seats to attend majority-Black schools that are farther away. Similarly, some white students are transported past nearby majority-Black schools to attend schools that are mostly white.

Making this situation even worse is the fact that the Boston public school system treats majority-Black schools differently from majority-white schools. Boston spends less money on textbooks, libraries, and in-school health services at mostly Black schools than at mostly white schools. Boston's majority-Black schools are also overcrowded and in poor physical condition. Many of these buildings need repairs to address health and safety concerns.



Studies commissioned in the 1950s and early 1960s on Boston's public schools, like the one above, detailed deteriorating physical conditions in many schools and recommended closing several. Boston City Archives.

Overall, Boston spends only about \$240 per Black student, compared to \$340 per white student each year.

African American students also often lack access to Black teachers. Although Black residents make up about 15 percent of Boston's population, only .5 percent of Boston public school teachers are Black, and there are no Black principals. Compared to white students, Black students do not receive much support preparing for and applying to college.

The Legal Context

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the landmark 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that laws requiring schools to be segregated—*de jure* segregation—were unconstitutional and could no longer be enforced.



Stamp commemorating the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, 2005. National Postal Museum.

De jure segregation:

Separation between races that is mandated by law (once especially common in the southern U.S.).

De facto segregation:

Separation between races that exists for reasons other than legal mandates, such as living patterns, customs, and policy decisions that are not explicitly based on racial distinctions.

What makes the situation in Boston so complicated is that there is no similar law to target in court. Boston's racially imbalanced schools result partly from longstanding housing patterns, partly from the daily customs of city residents, and partly from policy decisions by municipal officials—*de facto* segregation. This makes it more difficult to use the courts to pursue a legal solution, as was done in the U.S. South.

Even as Black people in Boston wrestle with the issue of racially imbalanced schools, there are many other civil rights issues on their minds. In 1963 it is still legal to say that certain businesses, water fountains, and train cars are “White Only” or “Black Only.” It is legal for job ads to specify that only white applicants will be considered. There are also no laws prohibiting white people selling their homes from advertising a preference for “whites only” in certain neighborhoods.

Official Resistance to Change

Since the 1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has been involved in the effort to improve educational opportunities for Black students in Boston. The NAACP has played a prominent role in movements across the United States to secure civil rights for people of all races and ethnicities. It was NAACP attorneys who argued (and won) the *Brown v. Board of Education* case before the U.S. Supreme Court.



Lawyers George Hayes, Thurgood Marshall, and James Nabrit Jr. celebrate their victory striking down legal segregation in public schools in front of the U.S. Supreme Court on May 17, 1954. World Wide Photos, National Portrait Gallery.

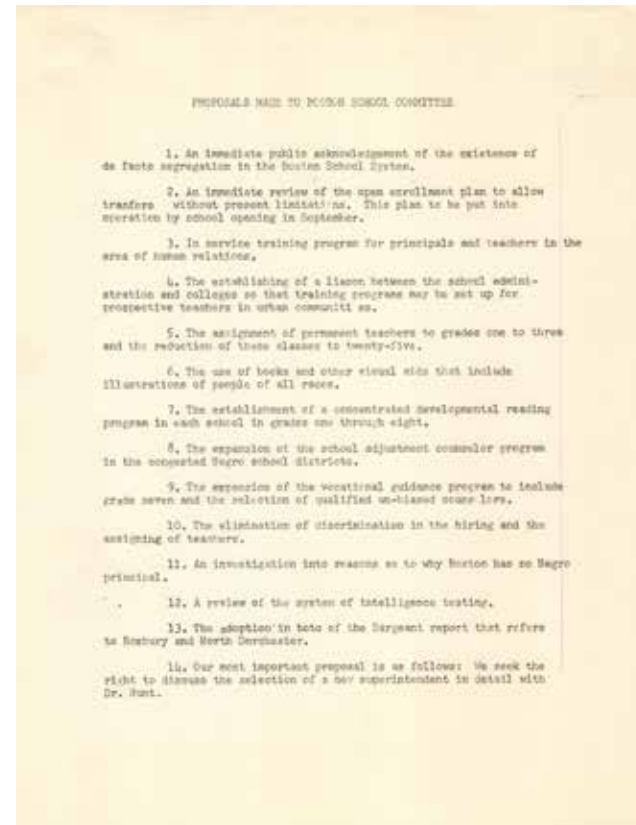
For years, the NAACP and community activists have been struggling to convince the Boston School Committee to take action to improve the education of Boston's Black children, with little success.

On June 11 of this year (1963), members of the NAACP's Education Committee, led by longtime activist and committee chair Ruth Batson, met for eight hours with the BSC. Batson and her team presented the results of a study of Boston's race-based educational inequities and proposed 14 actions to address this discrimination.

Among their other demands, Batson and the NAACP petitioned for “an immediate public acknowledgment of the existence of *de facto* segregation in the Boston Public system” from the BSC (see below). The BSC refused to acknowledge this, and the meeting ended without an agreement from the committee to take any action to address the inequities identified by the NAACP.



Parents and community leaders, including the NAACP Education Committee, meet with Boston School Committee, June 11, 1963. Northeastern University Library, Melnea A. Cass Papers.



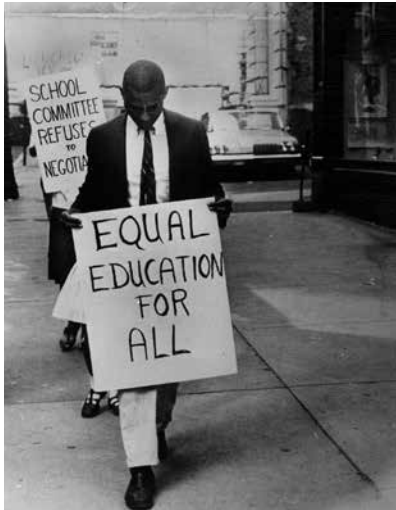
14 proposals made by the NAACP to the Boston School Committee at the June 11, 1963, meeting. Northeastern University Library, Phyllis M. Ryan Papers.

What Should We Do?

The conversation you are about to have takes place just after the June 11 meeting between the NAACP and the BSC. It seems clear to Black parents and their allies that most BSC members have little interest in taking meaningful steps to address the inequalities and resulting poor outcomes for Black students in Boston. It is time to discuss next steps. What is the best path forward? How can we provide a better education for young African American students in Boston?

What follows are three possible options for fixing this problem. Each option describes actions that could be taken. There is no right or wrong option; each has benefits and drawbacks. The options are summarized below and explained in more detail on the following pages. Please consider each option carefully and be ready to share what you think should be done to address racial inequities in the Boston school system.

OPTION ONE: TREAT BLACK STUDENTS EQUALLY IN THEIR CURRENT SCHOOLS



Picket of Boston School Committee, 1963. Northeastern University Library, James W. Fraser Collection.

African American students in the Boston public school system are not receiving the educational benefits offered to white students. They are not being provided the resources they need to succeed. The most effective way to help Boston's Black students is by ensuring that the city's educational resources are distributed equally to students of all races.

The disparities between schools with majority-white and majority-Black student populations couldn't be starker. Students at majority-white schools have access to better instructional technology and materials and enjoy safer and more comfortable classrooms. Students at majority-Black schools are too often crammed into overcrowded classrooms in old, poorly maintained school buildings and forced to make do with out-of-date textbooks.

These educational disparities are the most direct cause of harms inflicted on Boston's Black students. No other changes to school policies and procedures will matter unless Black students are given educational resources on a par with those provided to white students.

Seeking equal resources for Black children in their current schools is the least disruptive path to improved outcomes. Entrenched white power structures in this city are very resistant to the idea of making dramatic changes to which schools are attended by Black and white students. We are unlikely to change their minds on that point any time soon, and attempts to do so could cost another generation of students the chance to get the education they deserve.

In contrast to more sweeping changes, achieving equal resources for all students will require smaller alterations to current practices. Because these reforms may not seem as threatening to white officials and parents as immediate integration, they may be less likely to trigger the kind of violent backlash we have seen in recent years as Southern school districts have been forced to comply with the Supreme Court's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

We know that separate schools with equal resources aren't the perfect form of education for Boston's Black children. But if we want to maximize benefits for these children over the shortest timeframe possible, this option is the most practical path forward. Providing Black students with the same teacher/student ratios, textbooks, labs, and facilities that white students benefit from will make the biggest improvement in Black educational outcomes with the least controversy.

OPTION ONE: TREAT BLACK STUDENTS EQUALLY IN THEIR CURRENT SCHOOLS

MAIN ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF OPTION 1

At this time, the fact that Boston schools are racially imbalanced is considerably less important than the fact that Black children are so badly disadvantaged in the overcrowded and under-resourced schools they attend. Our priority must be to provide these schools with extra resources and more attention. More teachers must be hired and more resources should be devoted to ensuring support services, up-to-date books, and better instructional equipment. These students need help now.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Direct more funding to majority-Black schools to ensure that they can purchase the same resources and bring buildings up to the same standards majority-white schools enjoy.

Hire more teachers to improve teacher/student ratios in majority-Black schools.

Provide financial support for professional development training for teachers in Black-majority schools who face additional challenges due to overcrowding, inferior facilities, and lack of support staff.

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS

Taxpayers are accustomed to seeing their tax dollars support schools in their own communities. A shift to distributing public money based on need rather than geography may generate considerable resentment.

Funding this may require higher taxes, and there is no guarantee that new teachers will want to work in these schools.

Public funds are limited, so increasing training expenditures for teachers in some schools will require cost-cutting in others.

PAUL PARKS



Paul Parks. Northeastern University Library.

Paul Parks, a Boston engineer of African American and Native American ancestry, was born in 1923. His father was a disabled World War I veteran, and his mother was a social worker.

During World War II, Parks served in the still-segregated U.S. Army as a combat engineer, participating in the D-Day invasion of German-occupied France and witnessing the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp.

As a professional engineer in Boston after the war, he designed dams, missiles, and buildings. His concern for the inequities facing his fellow African Americans led him to join the NAACP's Education Committee, which was focused at the time on the unequal conditions in Boston schools.

Parks's technical training enabled him to assess the dangers of crumbling infrastructure, mold, and contaminated water supplies in buildings. He used those skills to compile and analyze evidence of the state of many Black schools. He found that most of the 14 predominantly Black schools in Boston were old and neglected, raising serious health and safety concerns for students and staff alike.

Parks was an important member of the NAACP team, led by Ruth Batson, that petitioned the Boston School Committee for support in addressing inequities in Boston public schools in June 1963.

OPTION TWO: INTEGRATE SCHOOLS NOW



Black protesters protest de facto segregation outside Boston School Committee offices, 1963. Northeastern University Library, James W. Fraser Collection.

African American students in Boston are being harmed by racial segregation in the schools they attend, and it is vital that this situation be corrected. Every effort should be made to achieve full desegregation in the Boston public school system as quickly as possible.

Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was correct when he wrote in the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision: "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Warren argued that separating children "solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."ⁱ

The damages experienced by Black students in Boston's racially divided schools are not only a poor-quality education but also negative social, psychological, and financial effects that will follow them for the rest of their lives and could even be passed down from generation to generation.

When Ruth Batson spoke to the Boston School Committee on June 11, she observed that "one of the most frustrating and devastating obstacles confronting [African Americans] is the lack of educational opportunity." She went on:

"Education constitutes our strongest hope for pulling ourselves out of the inferior status to which society has assigned us. A boy of eight or nine years, who is receiving an inferior education today, will feel the effects at age thirty-five, forty-five, and until he dies, as he struggles as a father to rear his children. His lack of educational opportunity will make it impossible for him to motivate his children properly and thus, this burden is inherited by each succeeding generation."ⁱⁱ

The racial divide in Boston's public schools is simply unacceptable. Legally mandated school segregation has already been found to be unconstitutional. De facto segregation is just as harmful, and the fact that there is no law explicitly banning it shouldn't matter. Accepting ongoing segregation means accepting too much else that is wrong with the world. Nothing short of desegregation will equalize Black and white educational outcomes, so it is worth any potential short-term pain and disruption to confront and dismantle de facto segregation in schools as one step toward achieving true equality for African American people at all stages of their lives.



Activists in New York City advocate for desegregation, 1964. National Museum of African American History and Culture.

OPTION TWO: INTEGRATE SCHOOLS NOW

MAIN ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF OPTION 2

Racial discrimination in education is against the law. Yet today, African American students in Boston are being harmed because de facto segregation keeps them in overcrowded and inferior schools. Black students suffer academically, which may have long-term implications, both economic and social. It is worth accepting short-term disruption and pain to desegregate schools now and secure future success for all Bostonians.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Organize press conferences, walkouts, and sit-ins to draw attention to the unequal nature of Boston schools and to show support for change.

Take advantage of Boston's open enrollment system by busing students from overcrowded majority-Black schools to majority-white schools with open seats.

Bring a civil rights lawsuit against the Boston School Committee charging racial discrimination in school assignments, curriculum materials, staffing, facilities, and transportation.

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS

Public controversy may cause the Boston School Committee to become even more resistant to change.

Black students will have to endure longer commute times and may encounter hostility at their new schools. They may feel cut off from their neighborhoods and the friends who live there, while those students left behind will still be in substandard schools.

Legal rulings directing the school system to integrate could result in a backlash in which Black students would face hostility from white students, teachers, and parents.

RUTH BATSON



Ruth Batson. Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute.

Ruth Batson was born in the predominantly Black, working-class neighborhood of Roxbury to Jamaican parents who placed a high value on education. As a parent in the 1940s, she saw how poorly the Boston school system treated Black students.

In 1949 Batson joined the Parents' Federation, which fought to reform the Boston school system to make it more equitable for all students. Two years later, she ran for a seat on the Boston School Committee, the first time in the twentieth century that a Black woman had done so. She finished 16th out of 36, but the experience awakened an interest in and instinct for politics that shaped the rest of her life. Real change, she believed, necessitated political involvement.

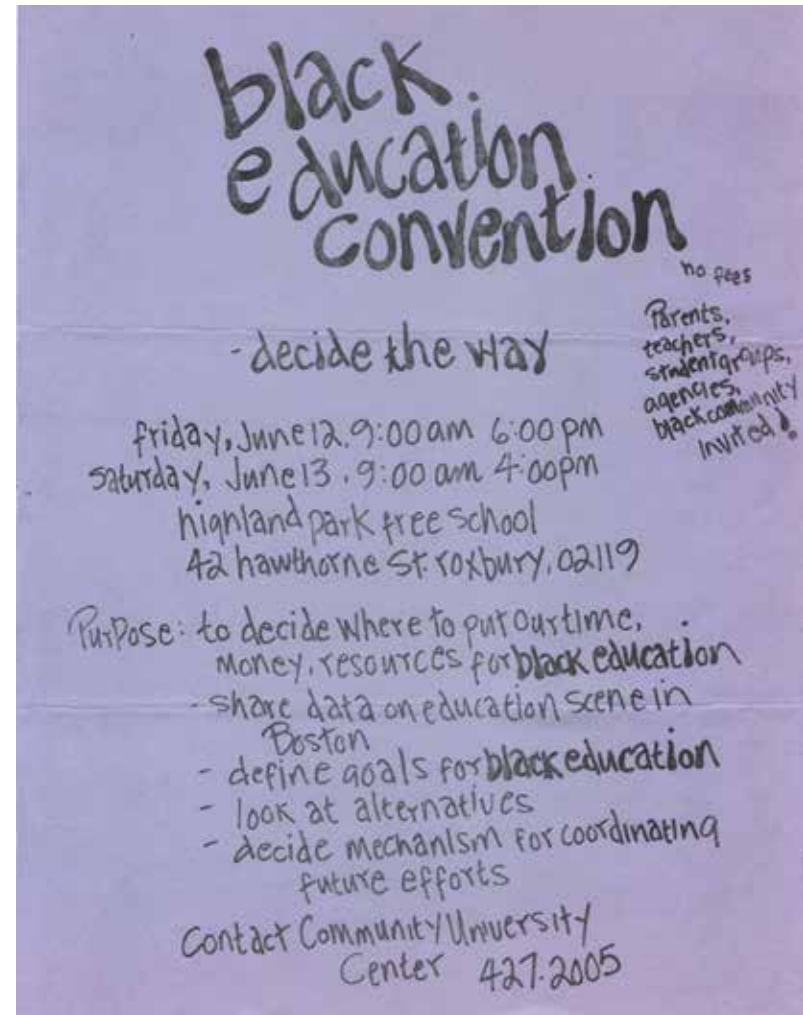
Batson joined the Boston NAACP's Education Committee in 1953. Her work put her in contact with Black parents throughout the city. She heard story after story about outdated educational materials, overcrowding, and the disrespect toward Black students shown by white teachers and administrators.

Based on this work, Batson rejected the Boston School Committee's claim that racial imbalances in the Boston school system were not an appropriate matter for the committee to address. Speaking to the BSC in June 1963, she declared that "in the discussion of segregation in fact in our public schools, we do not accept residential segregation as an excuse for countenancing this situation."ⁱⁱⁱ

OPTION THREE: SHIFT CONTROL OF SCHOOLS IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

Boston's Black schoolchildren are not receiving a high-quality education, and this is unlikely to change as long as whites control the school system. Any changes made to correct racial imbalances in Boston schools will make little difference in the long term if Black children are still forced to learn from white teachers relying on a white-centered curriculum. The best way to help Boston's Black students is for the African American community to take a more active role in looking after its own children, including through local control of what, how, and by whom they are taught.

White curricular materials will tend to serve white interests and emphasize the white side of the story. Using white-created textbooks, African American students are less likely to learn about the history of Black resistance, leadership, and heroism in the fight for equal rights and full citizenship. They need to hear these stories, not only to become historically literate but also to understand that they themselves are capable of great things. That is not an impression they are likely to form while reading the textbooks currently supplied by Boston's public school system.



Invitation to Black education convention, 1970s. Northeastern University Library.



*African American educational activism button, 1960s.
National Museum of African American History and Culture.*



*Black Pride button, 1960s. National Museum of African American
History and Culture.*

Although it is not possible for Black Bostonians to wash their hands of white-run schools, it is vital to provide their children with alternatives. Education has long been used to erase the cultural identities of minorities and force them to accept the views and values of the dominant culture. To protect Black children and help them thrive, it is important to look for opportunities for them to learn about, take pride in, and appreciate African American culture.

The idea of the Black community exercising greater control over the schools attended by its children is not as strange as it may sound, even here in Boston in 1963. All African Americans would be asking for would be that their schools reflect their community's history, values, and aspirations—just as majority-white schools already reflect what is important to their communities.

To give Boston's African American students the best possible education, the Black community must be allowed to exercise greater control over its neighborhood schools. By using their own community's resources and other strategies, Black Bostonians can augment and even counter the official curriculum and craft school cultures that are more supportive of African American students.

OPTION THREE: SHIFT CONTROL OF SCHOOLS IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

MAIN ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF OPTION 3

Black parents should have more control over local schools. With more control, they can ensure that their children will receive a rigorous and meaningful education that teaches them to take pride in African American culture. Curricular materials that convey the white perspective often minimize the history and culture of African Americans. The best way to ensure that Black children learn and thrive is for Black parents to step in before another generation is harmed by the system.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Expand community control of schools, including oversight of hiring, curriculum, and maintenance of school buildings. Hire more Black teachers and administrators so that African American students will be taught by people who understand their culture and the obstacles they will face in U.S. society.

Start independent community schools to provide alternative educational venues outside the Boston public school system.

Community-based groups should develop afterschool, weekend, and summer programs that prioritize the interests and needs of Black students and offset the disadvantages of large classes by giving students more individual attention.

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS

Majority-white neighborhoods will want more local control, too, and they may use it in ways that further disadvantage Black students who attend their schools.

Credentials from these community-run schools may not be accepted as valid by other K-12 school systems or by colleges and universities.

White school officials might use the existence of these programs to argue that no further changes are needed in the public school system.

JEAN MCGUIRE



Jean McGuire. Northeastern University Library.

Jean McGuire experienced firsthand how a racist school system can erase the story of African American achievement.

During her early years in Boston's public schools, she chose to read a poem by a Black writer for an assignment. In response, her teacher told her that "everyone knows coloreds can't write poetry." McGuire's mother had frequently read to her from the work of Black writers, so she knew that the teacher was wrong. But she never forgot this experience, and she also never forgot that not all Black parents were able to provide the kind of supplemental education to their children that her own mother had given her.

McGuire had a very different experience when she moved to Washington, D.C., and attended Dunbar High School, a well-regarded all-Black school staffed by African American teachers. According to her, at Dunbar, "excellence and achievement were expected of us all." She continued: "Dunbar didn't just encourage. It demanded that its youth be something."^{iv}

After returning to Boston, McGuire completed an education degree at Boston State College in 1961. She became the only Black student counselor in the Boston Public School system, where she once again had a front-row view of its inequities.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

ⁱⁱ Batson, Ruth. "Proposals Made to Boston School Committee." Phyllis M. Ryan Papers (M 94). University Libraries. Archives and Special Collections Department. Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Box 3, Folder 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Batson, Ruth. "Statement to the Boston School Committee." Phyllis M. Ryan papers (M94). University Libraries. Archives and Special Collections Department. Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Box 3, Folder 2.

^{iv} Ebert, Alan. "Jean McGuire: Working and Fighting to Save Our Children." New York: *ESSENCE*, February 1973. Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, Inc. Records (M101) University Libraries. Archives and Special Collections Department. Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Box 41, Folder 36.