

INQUIRY

The Pursuit of Educational Justice in Boston

Overview

About This Inquiry

When the history of Boston in the 1970s is told in books, films, school curricula, and other media, the narrative is often dominated by what is commonly remembered as the city's "busing crisis." This is an inadequate and misleading framing of that time. The issue at the heart of the conflict was desegregation, not busing. The racial violence and tumult in the city in the mid-1970s was the backlash to a decades-long effort by African American Bostonians to desegregate the city's schools and a 1974 federal court order that affirmed those efforts. As historian Jeanne Theoharis points out, students in Boston had been bused to schools outside of their own neighborhoods for decades, but until the 1970s students were bused to *preserve* segregation in schools rather than *eliminate* it.¹ Yet desegregation was not the only issue of educational justice on the minds of Bostonians at that time. Focusing solely on desegregation leaves out the experiences and perspectives of thousands of additional Bostonians with a stake in the city's public school system during this period, especially Latinx and Chinese American Bostonians.

This [C3-style inquiry](#) helps students view the era through a wider lens: one that brings into focus not only the perspectives of poor and working-class African American and white Bostonians but also the city's Latinx and Chinese American residents. Students will learn about the variety of efforts by African American, Latinx, and Chinese American Bostonians in the 1960s and 1970s to ensure that their children received the education they deserved. In addition to desegregation, students will explore debates over bilingual education and community input in schooling. They will learn about the campaigns, protests, boycotts, and legal actions organized by Bostonians in pursuit of educational justice. Through this wider lens, students will reflect on and develop perspectives on the educational experiences that all students have a right to receive at school. They will also explore questions of power and responsibility as these relate to providing children with fair and equitable educational opportunities. Lastly, students will consider the ways that the biases and blind spots of both individuals and institutions contribute to educational inequity.

As they explore historical and contemporary sources, students will draw connections between the efforts of Bostonians half a century ago and the challenges to equity and justice in schools today. Students will apply lessons and inspiration from these past efforts to today's ongoing pursuit of educational justice in Boston and across the country.

¹ Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 52.

Compelling Question	What can we learn from Boston's past about what it takes to make progress toward educational justice today?
Supporting Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did African American, Latinx, and Chinese American Bostonians envision educational justice for their children in the 1960s and 1970s? 2. How did African American, Latinx, and Chinese American Bostonians pursue educational justice in the 1960s and 1970s? 3. What impact did the 1974 decision in <i>Morgan v. Hennigan</i> have on Boston's African American, Latinx, Chinese American, and white children and parents, and how did they respond? 4. What does the pursuit of educational justice in Boston look like today?

Learning Objectives

- Define *educational justice*.
- Explain the goals, strategies, and actions of African American, Latinx, and Chinese American Bostonians in their pursuit of equitable and just access to education for their children in the 1960s and 1970s.
- Explain the impact of the 1974 ruling in *Morgan v. Hennigan*, the responses to the ruling from African American, Latinx, Chinese American, and white Bostonians, and the implications for educational justice for each community.
- Draw connections between the fight for educational justice in Boston in the 1960s and 1970s and the ongoing pursuit for educational justice in Boston and other communities today.
- Examine how individuals and communities can participate in the pursuit of educational justice today by drawing upon various sources of power.

Rationale & Additional Background

In the 1960s and 1970s, African American, Latinx, and Chinese American Bostonians—the three fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups in Boston at the time—organized parallel movements to protest the city's failure to provide their children with equitable schools and their communities' invisibility to the city's white-dominated power structure. Propelled in large part by the efforts of working-class mothers and students themselves, the goal of all three movements was for Boston's children of color to have access to the same quality of education as white children in the city and surrounding suburbs.

Educational Justice for African American Bostonians

Desegregation was one method for achieving this goal. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led the movement to desegregate Boston's schools because, based on their observations in Boston and experience nationwide, money and resources flowed most readily to the schools that white students attended. According to Ruth Batson, chair of Boston's NAACP Public Schools subcommittee, "Where there were a large

number of white students, that's where the care went. That's where the books went. That's where the money went."²

African American Bostonians also pursued other means of achieving educational justice for their children in addition to desegregation. These included establishing organizations in the mid-1960s that enrolled African American students at well-resourced schools in the city and suburbs and provided transportation to get there. African American Bostonians also founded four independent elementary schools with Black principals and majority-Black faculty.

Educational Justice for Latinx Bostonians

Like the African American community, Latinx Bostonians decried the disparity in resources, supplies, and the physical condition of school buildings between the schools attended by their children and those attended by white children. A growing community of Puerto Rican and immigrant newcomers, Latinx Bostonians also prioritized bilingual education. A 1970 report showed what Latinx parents and activists already knew: between one-third and one-half of Latinx children in Boston did not attend school at all, in large part because the educational needs of those who did were not being met:

The educational programs, by the School Department's own admission, are failing to educate the numbers of Spanish-speaking children who are in school. The people in the Spanish-speaking community—leaders and parents—know that the school system is failing to educate their children. Because there are no adequate programs for them, there is little alternative but to allow their children to remain out of school.³

In addition to establishing their own schools and summer programs to teach children English and prepare them for public school, Latinx activists and parents led the charge to establish bilingual education programs in the public schools themselves, building on national and state legislation. Bilingual education required students who spoke the same language to be clustered in the same schools, so if desegregation were to occur, it would need to be designed carefully so as not to eliminate those clusters and undermine the programs.

Educational Justice for Chinese American Bostonians

Bilingual education was also important to Boston's small but growing Chinese American community. After the reversal of immigration restrictions targeting people from Asia—first with the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and later with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended the race-based immigration quota system—Chinese women and families were arriving in Boston's Chinatown for the first time in decades. Few spoke English fluently. At the same time, highways and new hospital construction resulting from urban renewal programs were decimating the Chinatown neighborhood. When the city and Tufts-New England Medical Center drew up plans to replace the old and deteriorating elementary school building in Chinatown without consulting residents, Chinese American Bostonians both demanded a voice in the planning and co-led the process of designing a new school program that would counteract

² Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam, 1990), Kindle edition, 589.

³ [*The Way We Go to School: The Exclusion of Children in Boston*](#), report by the Task Force on Children Out of School (US Department of Health, Education & Welfare, Office of Education, 1970), 18–20.

“the dehumanizing attitude which implies that anyone who speaks a different tongue or dialect or who displays some regional difference in speech or custom or some racial, ethnic or color difference is inferior.”⁴

The Impact of Morgan v. Hennigan

Through school boycotts, protests, supplemental school programs, and legal action, the efforts of African American, Latinx, and Chinese American Bostonians achieved a series of limited successes in the 1960s and early 1970s. But, due to the intransigence of the Boston School Committee, the problems persisted. In 1965, resulting in part from the lobbying efforts of the NAACP, Massachusetts enacted the Racial Imbalance Act, which required the desegregation of school systems that were more than 50% non-white—thus exempting majority-white suburban districts from requirements to take action—and enabled the state to withhold funding if schools did not comply. By 1973, the district had given up as much as \$65 million in state funding as a penalty for noncompliance with the law.

As a last resort, the NAACP sued the school committee in federal court. When judge W. Arthur Garrity's 1974 ruling in *Morgan v. Hennigan* required the immediate desegregation of the city's schools, backlash, often violent, erupted in many of the city's white communities. At the same time, the judge's initial order did not account for the impact it would have on Latinx and Chinese American students.

Leaders in the three communities took action, often heroically, to keep their children safe while not giving up on their demands for educational justice. African American Bostonians persisted through withering opposition to desegregation and frightening violence, pressuring the city and often risking their own safety to ensure their children's safe attendance at desegregated schools. Latinx Bostonians, led by a group of working-class mothers who were angered by how the judge's initial desegregation order unwittingly decimated the bilingual education programs they had fought so hard to establish, successfully demanded that Judge Garrity give them a role in designing the second year of desegregation. Chinese American Bostonians, led by working-class mothers who were fearful that the city was sending their youngest children to schools in hostile neighborhoods, organized an unprecedented boycott that forced the federal government to give in to their list of demands and helped their neighborhood find its voice.

This era in Boston's history is often remembered as a failure, but there is much for us to learn from it today about cultivating power in our communities, raising our voices, and participating in the ongoing struggle for educational justice.

⁴ Excerpted from [Program Requirements and Design Specifications for the Quincy School Complex](#) by the Quincy School Community Council and the Quincy School Project Staff Planning Office, Tufts-New England Medical Center (September 1969).

Preparing to Teach

Notes to Teacher:

1. Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question (“What can we learn from Boston’s past about what it takes to make progress toward educational justice today?”), students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument supported by a variety of evidence.

Download the **Inquiry Blueprint** for an at-a-glance view of all inquiry materials.

2. Grade Level and Length of the Inquiry

While it may be adapted for a range of secondary-level classes, this inquiry is designed primarily for eighth-grade civics or history students. Throughout, there are suggestions and additional resources to support adapting the inquiry for high school students.

This inquiry is expected to take seven to nine 50-minute class periods.

Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry in order to meet the needs and interests of their particular students as well as the available class time. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 plans for students with disabilities.

3. Classroom Preparation

In the activities for Supporting Question 2, students work extensively with a timeline of events related to the pursuit of educational justice in Boston from the 1950s until the early 1970s. Consider hanging the timeline around the classroom before beginning this inquiry to build student interest and anticipation in advance of those activities.

4. Prerequisite Knowledge

This inquiry is designed to help students explore, through a focused examination of the pursuit of educational justice in Boston in the 1960s and 1970s, the meaning of educational justice and how we can participate in bringing it about in our communities today. The inquiry is intended to supplement a civics or US history course.

Over the course of this inquiry, students will consider the power that a variety of individuals, groups, organizations, agencies, and political officeholders had to either help solve or worsen issues of educational injustice in Boston in the 1960s and 1970s. In order to engage more deeply with the content and activities of the inquiry, it is helpful for students to already have some foundational knowledge about the following:

- The powers, responsibilities, and jurisdictions of federal, state, and local governments

- Some ways in which citizens, both individually and through organizing, can interact with government to address community problems and concerns

It may also be useful for students to be familiar with the meanings of race, class, and socioeconomic status. Both the lesson [The Concept of Race](#) and the reading [Inventing Black and White](#) can help introduce students to the idea of race as a social construct and how it has been used to justify exclusion, inequality, and violence throughout history. In addition, since students will be confronting ethnic and racial stereotypes in this inquiry, we strongly recommend teaching the lesson [Stereotypes and “Single Stories”](#) if you have not yet introduced students to those concepts.

5. Related Topics

While these are not prerequisites for engaging with this inquiry, there are a number of historical topics that closely relate to the history of the pursuit of educational justice in Boston in the 1960s and 1970s. If you are implementing this inquiry in a US history course, look for opportunities to help students connect the content of the inquiry with the topics listed below:

- The civil rights movement in the United States, both in the South and the North
- Twentieth-century urbanization policies and programs (including redlining and urban renewal)
- The impact of immigration laws such as the Page Act (1875), the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act), and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965
- The history of Puerto Rican, Caribbean, and Latinx migration and diaspora

6. Notes about Language

The term “Negro” is used in some primary sources in this inquiry. While outdated and offensive today, it was used by both white and Black Americans as a standard term for African Americans during the time of desegregation. It is important to explain to students that this antiquated term is now considered offensive.

This inquiry details efforts to pursue educational equity by the Latinx community. We recognize that the use of the word *Latinx* is complex, and we use it in the spirit of inclusivity for our teacher-facing materials. There will be times when the words *Latino(s)*, *Latina(s)*, and *Hispanic* are used in the primary sources. We have chosen to keep this language to reflect 1) the language and usage of the time and 2) the range of preferences that Latinx people have about what words best describe their communities.

7. A Note on Racial and Ethnic Classifications

Race and ethnicity classifications are complex, and they are not sufficient to capture the diversity that exists within any single group. Nevertheless, an important part of learning about the history of educational justice in Boston in the 1960s and 1970s is understanding how race and ethnicity were conceptualized at the time. In this inquiry, we have attempted to use terms denoting racial and ethnic groups with care and intention.

Before sharing the **Boston Community Profiles** with students in the **Staging the**

Compelling Question activities, review the document “**A Note on Racial and Ethnic Classifications**” for important information about how this inquiry uses these terms. You might use the information in the document to support your ability to provide clarity and guidance to students. You might also choose to share and discuss the document itself with the class.