

School Segregation in Milwaukee in the 1960s

Goals

Students investigate survey responses by Black residents and a school boycott flier to learn about segregated schools. They will compare conditions then with their own schools today.

Central Questions

What were schools in Milwaukee like in the early 1960s? What were the major issues facing students and teachers? Do you see any of these issues in your own school? What can be done to improve schools and learning?

Background Information

Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision declaring racial segregation illegal, a 1960 survey of Milwaukee schools found that schools in the central city were 90 percent black. In March 1964, community activists, including attorney Lloyd Barbee, Milwaukee Common Council member Vel Phillips, and Father James Groppi organized the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC). In May 1964, MUSIC organized a boycott of predominantly Black schools in which more than half of African American students participated. They also challenged segregated schools through picketing, demonstrations, and other direct actions.

Parents were upset by the vast differences in quality between majority Black and majority white schools. Another point of contention was “intact busing,” or transporting African American students to all-white schools but keeping them in segregated classrooms, cafeterias, and activities in those schools. Many Black children were also tracked into vocational classes instead of business or college prep classes.

In 1965, Barbee filed a lawsuit charging the Milwaukee School Board with practicing discrimination. The city fought the lawsuit for 14 years, all the way to the US Supreme Court, which finally ruled in Barbee’s favor in March 1979.

Documents Used in This Lesson:

1. Comments by Black residents from *Attitude Study among Negro and White Residents in the Milwaukee Negro Residential Areas* (Milwaukee: Bisbing Business Research, 1965): 67-70.
<http://wihist.org/1uUxFM6>
2. Flier recruiting residents for a march protesting segregated schools on August 28 (probably 1967) Milwaukee United School Integration Committee Records, 1964-1966, Box 1, Folder 5.
<http://wihist.org/1zVODdf>

This lesson plan could be used in conjunction with Lesson 3, Milwaukee School Boycott, May 18, 1964 (p. 18) or Lesson 9, Segregation in Mississippi in 1960 (p. 50).

Document 1: Comments by Black residents from the 1965 *Attitude Study among Negro and White Residents in the Milwaukee Negro Residential Areas*. <http://wihist.org/1uUxFM6>

- Those schools should have been torn down long ago. I work on construction, help build schools -- in other areas they have everything. The lobbys are bigger than the auditoriums around here.
- The curriculum is not up to date. The textbooks are not what they should be, and the teachers are not in sympathy with the kids.
- There is so much difference between the Negro and White school children. Kids on the side don't know anything about their subjects; the way they conduct themselves and their environments are different. I was really suprised -- the the kids from this side have to play by themselves.
- Most of the White schools have first-class facilities whereas, we have to use the things that they don't want anymore.
- Because they could have lunch rooms and more playground space, more room on the sidewalk and more crossing guards.
- Some of the teachers are prejudiced.
- Well, I could say that the teachers are not rough enough on the kids.
- I feel that Negro children being moved from one area to another is bad. It is unfair to go somewhere where you are not wanted. I also feel that they should have more schools built in Negro neighborhoods and all this trouble could be avoided.
- Some kids don't get the books that they need. They get the old books from the White schools. I think they should have just what the White schools should have.

Questions

Document 1: Comments by Black residents on Milwaukee's segregated schools in 1965.

1. With two or three classmates, make a list in your own words of the problems in the schools. Does your own school have any of these problems today?
2. Decide as a group which problem was the most serious. Why did you choose that one? How do you think that problem affected students' abilities to achieve success in the future? How are these problems connected to the social and economic disparities in Milwaukee?
3. Imagine that the schools fixed all these problems and schools in Black neighborhoods were just as good as the ones in white neighborhoods. Decide if it would still be OK for Black kids and white kids to attend separate schools. Why or why not?
4. Find another group that answered question 2 or 3 differently than your group did. Ask them why, listen to their explanation, and then try to persuade them to agree with you instead.

Document 2: Flier recruiting residents for a march protesting segregated schools.
<http://wihist.org/1zVODdf>

How much is Milwaukee segregation costing YOU and ME?



INFERIOR SCHOOLS

"One of the surest ways to control the Negro is to control his education."
(Roy Wilkins) Milwaukee's 22,000 Negro children are controlled in 30 inferior, segregated schools.

Don't talk it. DO IT! MARCH
Fight INFERIOR SCHOOLS in the Milwaukee March toward Freedom and Independence, Aug. 28, 2 p. m., 12 and Lloyd.

-- Milwaukee March Executive Committee, 2944 N. 9th Street --

Questions

Document 2. Flier recruiting residents for a march protesting segregated schools.

1. Working with a partner, explain the main message of the cartoon in your own words. (Hint: “core” refers to Milwaukee’s Black neighborhood; “foundry” is a factory where people make things out of metal.)
2. List adjectives that describe the emotions the characters in the cartoon might be feeling. Which clues make you think that is what they are feeling?
3. What does the quotation from Roy Wilkins (to the right of the cartoon) mean? Who was in control in Milwaukee? Who didn’t have control? What are some other words for control?
4. Aside from education, list three other things that will affect the life you’ll live as an adult. Which one is the most important? Why? Explain your reasoning to your partner.
5. On another sheet of paper, draw a cartoon illustrating a social issue that you care about. What message are you trying to get across? How does your cartoon communicate that main message?