

This could be the last stop for busing in Louisville schools. Was it worth it?

Olivia Krauth and Mandy McLaren, Louisville Courier Journal

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Did "busing" work?

The answer depends on whom you ask — and how they define success.

For a school district lauded nationally for its dedication to ensuring its classrooms don't mirror Louisville's highly segregated neighborhoods, the prevailing answer has been "yes."

But within Louisville — rocked by more than 180 days of racial justice protests and more willing to listen to its Black residents, who make up nearly a quarter of the population and about 83% of the kids being bused — that answer is beginning to shift.

At its core, busing — the practice of using school assignments and transportation to desegregate classrooms — worked as intended. Louisville's schools are more racially integrated "than they otherwise would be," University of Louisville professor Tracy K'Meyer said.

But the thousands of Black and poor kids who still shoulder those desegregation efforts have never really got what they were promised: an equitable education.

Integration efforts have eroded over time, simultaneously becoming less effective and more inequitable.

A Courier Journal analysis of the district's student assignment plan found:

If busing failed in Louisville, it's because Louisville let it.

The modern-day assignment plan is a shell of the mandatory court-ordered busing that sparked riots in Louisville's streets in 1975.



How a busing plan hurt Black communities it aimed to help

[Read more](#)

Forty-six years ago, nearly all students — both white and Black — left their neighborhoods to create diverse schools.

But policy changes and court decisions whittled away the initial plan, with changes frequently placing the comfort of white families ahead of the needs of Black families.

Now, only 6,500 students — less than 7% of the district — are assigned to schools for diversity purposes. And nearly all of those students are Black.

The result: a racially inequitable plan that simultaneously places the burden of desegregating schools on Black students while ensuring they land in high-poverty, hyper-segregated schools should they stay close to home.

In essence, a plan meant to remedy racism has itself become increasingly racist.

"What we've come to," said Marty Pollio, the district's superintendent, is "a real racial equity issue.

"I think there is absolutely no debate with 'Is the student assignment plan working?' No, it is not."

With Louisville at the center of a racial justice reckoning, its school district is weighing a proposal that would boost equity for Black students but risks eroding the plan's original intent to integrate schools — this time beyond recognition.

If passed, the proposal could be the last stop for Louisville's decadeslong desegregation plan. Except for magnet schools, Louisville would be a half-step from what busing critics have wanted all along — a return to "neighborhood schools."

The desire to attend a school close to home is "still in the hearts of many, and sometimes in the hearts of those that may have had to get on the bus and go west," said school board Chairwoman Diane Porter, a retired Black educator whose board district includes the West End.



District officials see a difference between what critics want and what's proposed.

"This is not about segregating schools or keeping students in the West End. It's not about neighborhood schools," said Pollio, who is white.

"What we are saying is, families in west Louisville still have the choice to leave their neighborhood, but for the first time in 36 years, they would also have the opportunity to attend a school in their community like every other child in Jefferson County."



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By every measure, Louisville's public schools are resegregating — and the district isn't stopping them.

In less than a decade, the percentage of schools labeled "not diverse" has nearly quadrupled, based on the district's yardstick combining race, income and education.

Three-fourths of the schools the district considers too homogeneous have too many Black and poor students — which desegregation sought to avoid.

Close to one-third of schools would now fail a racial diversity quota used before the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the district's race-based assignment plan in 2007, The Courier Journal found.

And in 2007, about 2% of all Black students attended a racially isolated school, according to school demographic data.

By 2017, about 17% of all Black students went to a school where they made up at least 70% of the student body — if not more.

Those figures omit some of the district's least diverse schools, like overwhelmingly Black alternative schools and two schools designed for students of color. Those programs are issued a special state classification, meaning they don't receive a diversity score and their raw racial demographics are less readily available.

Policies to diversify schools were influenced less by thinking that white and Black kids sitting next to each other would result in higher test scores, K'Meyer said, and more about getting Black kids into schools with more resources.

K'Meyer, who wrote a book on school desegregation in Louisville, said she usually "recoils" when someone asks if busing worked.

"How do you define 'work'? And what do you measure it against?" she asked.

If the definition is creating integration and "relatively more equity," the district's plan worked, K'Meyer said.

Gary Orfield, a researcher at UCLA who helped steer Louisville's school desegregation work for decades, agreed. Louisville's integration plan worked better than those in several other large, urban districts, many of which are now segregated, he said.

"Desegregation compared to segregation is a substantial success," he said.

But segregation within a community will creep into schools no matter how strong a plan is, Orfield said.

Louisville's housing patterns — still intensely segregated — have not been sizably addressed since court-ordered busing began in 1975.

At the same time, K'Meyer said, Louisville's original school desegregation plan has been "watered down."

The district has "absolutely" been too lenient to the desires of white families in designing its assignment plan, said Kish Cumi Price, the education policy director for the Louisville Urban League.

"The current student assignment model was created to appease white families," Price said.

In a [2018 national look at school segregation](#), ProPublica found Louisville's public schools have a "medium" level of segregation, describing the district's racial distribution of students as "relatively uneven."

Now, students who desegregation efforts ostensibly sought to help are landing in racially isolated, high-poverty schools, a Courier Journal analysis found:

"Each tweak (of the student assignment plan) kind of allows a little bit more separateness and a little more concentrating of resources and high-achieving students," K'Meyer said.

On paper, the district says it will help schools become and stay diverse. In reality, its efforts are rarely strong enough to shift a school's demographics, district officials acknowledged.

And the district's actions often run counter to its stated goals.

Under its new assignment proposal, expected to face a school board vote in the coming months, West End kids would be able to attend school near their home — just as other students' school assignments have been for decades.

Students elsewhere in Louisville would not be required, or even have the option, to leave their neighborhoods to diversify the proposed schools in the West End.

That makes it a near certainty that any new schools in the West End will be among the most intensely segregated in the district — almost entirely Black and poor. During at least the initial phase of the new plan, middle and high school West End students choosing to stay close to home would attend the Academy @ Shawnee.

“We've put the responsibility of diversity on the families with the least amount of means,” said Keith Look, a former principal of the school.

“And instead of balancing the responsibility, we're still only saying that, ‘Well, if you want diversity, it's still up to you guys over here, if you choose to help the rest of us out.’”





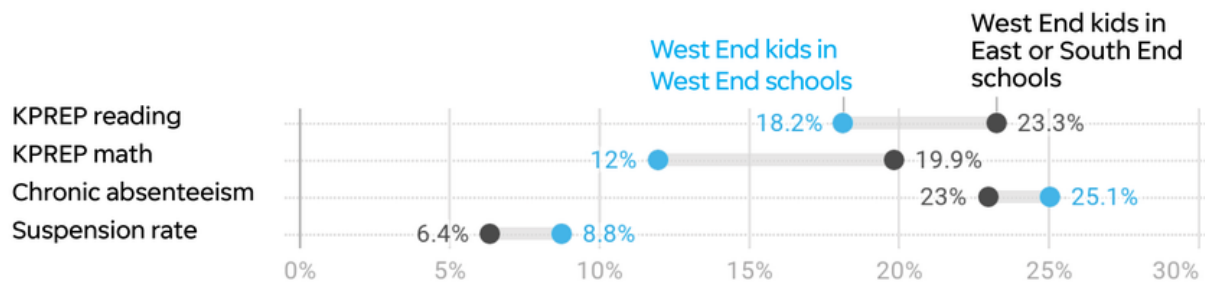
Busing shows evidence of boosting academic achievement, a Courier Journal analysis found.

West End elementary students who leave their neighborhood for non-magnet schools outperform students who stay behind, an analysis of student achievement data for the 2018-19 school year shows.

For those who leave:

Does busing help boost test scores?

West End elementary students who attend a school outside their neighborhood tend to see higher test scores and fewer issues with attendance and suspensions.



SOURCE: JCPD student data, 2018-19 KPREP scores. Graphic: Olivia Krauth/The Courier Journal. Created with Datawrapper.

Unlike in middle and high school, elementary students in the West End have a choice to leave their community or stay. It is difficult to tell how much that choice affects achievement.

Even so, The Courier Journal's analysis provides rare insight: Despite the national attention on Louisville's assignment plan, neither researchers nor the district itself have ever conducted a large-scale study of the plan's effect on academic achievement.

Orfield said The Courier Journal's findings make "perfect sense to me."

A successful school needs three things, he said: experienced teachers, a challenging curriculum and students prepared to learn.

"Those three things are concentrated in middle-class schools," he said.

In the West End, about 94% of students live at or near the poverty line. That figure is less than 40% in the East End areas their potential classmates live in.

While middle-class students' education is more determined by their parents' education levels, poor students' education is swayed more by the school they attend, Orfield explained.

The Courier Journal's analysis suggests the wealthier the area a student lives in, the more likely they are to pass state tests.

Similarly, The Courier Journal [reported](#) in 2019, the fewer poor students are clustered in a school, the higher its test scores tend to be.

Getting kids out of poverty has “been the argument for integration all along,” K’Meyer said.

Schools in poor neighborhoods are "struggling to overcome ... all the things that come with that," K’Meyer said.

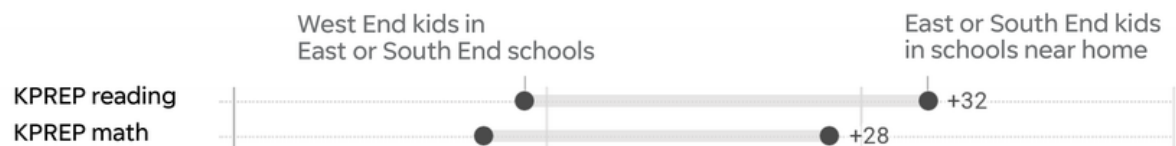
The Courier Journal's findings show a need to provide pathways to classrooms with less poverty while also better supporting students who opt to stay behind, K’Meyer said — and to begin addressing root causes of poverty as a city.

The modest gains Black students may see from attending lower-poverty schools don't catch them up with their white classmates, The Courier Journal's analysis found.

Once in schools outside of their neighborhood, West End students are outperformed by their classmates who live nearby — by about 32 points in reading and 28 points in math, the findings show.

Despite modest gains, gaps remain

West End kids heading to lower-poverty elementary schools see some growth but not enough to catch up to their new classmates.



Figures shown are gaps in percentage points between students who scored proficient or distinguished on KPREP.

SOURCE: 2018-19 KPREP scores. Graphic: Olivia Krauth/The Courier Journal. Created with Datawrapper.

Black students lag behind white students in nearly every public school in Louisville, including some in the West End and [popular magnet schools](#).

Saying desegregation efforts never improved achievement gaps, though, isn’t true. In the first decade of desegregation, K’Meyer wrote in her book, Louisville's gaps “narrowed dramatically.”

Then, around 1985, soon after the district placed its diversity burden predominantly on the West End, the gaps began widening.

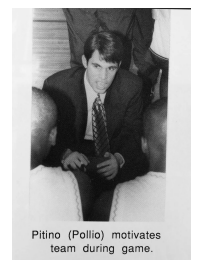
By 1996, K’Meyer wrote, the gap in reading scores had stabilized as the gap in math continued to fluctuate.

A year later, Pollio started as a teacher and basketball coach at the Academy @ Shawnee.

Now Louisville's superintendent, he points to an achievement gap that hasn’t shifted for much of his career — though desegregation efforts have weakened.

Pollio doesn't solely blame the student assignment plan for the achievement gap but says changing it is one "lever" the district can pull to help Black students.

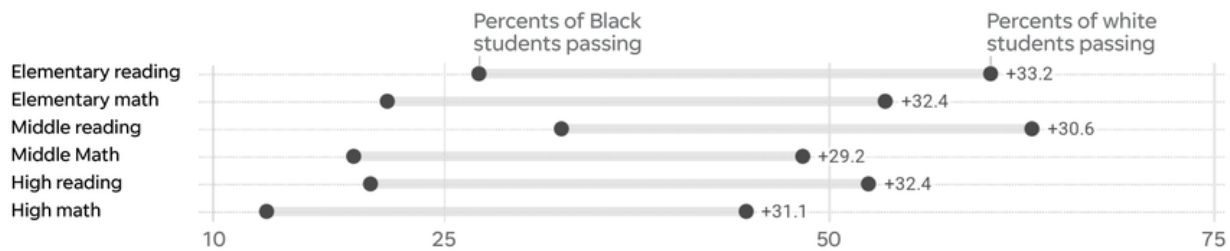
"Our success right now with kids in west Louisville, and particularly Black versus white, is unacceptable," Pollio said. "So, whether they do a little better or don't — that is something that I think we have to say we



have to do better with how we're supporting kids."

In JCPS, Black students at losing end of achievement gaps

While gaps in test scores between Black and white students vary between schools, on average, Black students tend to fall about 30 percentage points behind their white classmates.



Figures shown are gaps between Black and white students who scored proficient or distinguished at each school level districtwide.

SOURCE: 2018-19 KPREP scores. Graphic: Olivia Krauth/The Courier Journal. Created with Datawrapper.

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In 1972, a legal challenge argued a "separate but equal" education system of city and county school districts denied Louisville's Black students "equality of educational opportunity."

More than four decades later, equal access to educational opportunities still isn't guaranteed for Black students living in the West End.

Getting to school is a barrier, a Courier Journal analysis found:

BARRIERS TO EQUAL EDUCATION

**LONGER BUS
RIDES:** Bus rides are
slightly longer —
about three minutes
each way — for
minority students at
non-magnet schools
that pull students
from the West End.


**MORE RELIANCE ON
BUSES:** West End
residents are least
likely to own a car in
Louisville, making it

**more difficult to find
transportation.**


**BUS
DISCIPLINE:West
End kids are
disproportionately
suspended from
school buses —
comprising 45% of
all bus suspensions
despite making up
14% of the district.**

IMPLICIT BIAS: At district high schools, racial inequities are widespread, The Courier Journal's analysis shows:

Black students make up roughly two-thirds of all suspensions. White students make up a similar amount of the rosters for advanced courses.



**Disparities are
deepest in East End
schools pulling kids
from the West End,
where a Black
student is more than
six times as likely to
be suspended than a
white classmate.**



Despite East End schools offering, on average, the most AP courses, white students are more than three times as likely to take them.

District officials and researchers often attribute racial disparities to educators' implicit bias. Children having trouble processing trauma may be seen as having a behavioral issue, for example. Similarly, how kids are picked for gifted classes can disadvantage Black students, [research has found](#).

While busing increased access to better facilities and textbooks, Price said, "a full-scale change in policies, procedures and practices necessary to properly welcome and educate Black students has never taken place."

In early 2019, the district instituted a [racial equity plan](#) to ignite that full-scale change. By the end of the year, the district had progressed on [multiple fronts](#) — but stubborn gaps in academics and discipline haven't budged.

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Orfield argues the power of diverse schools lies not in immediate boosts to test scores, but in "substantial" lifetime and community effects.

In a 2011 survey, he and researcher Erica Frankenberg found most parents said integrated schools benefited the larger community.

In their studies of Louisville's efforts, they found students of all races felt more comfortable discussing race and working with those who don't look like them, both in school and after graduation.

"You don't learn that in a segregated neighborhood," Orfield said.

Look, the former Shawnee principal, sees the reasoning behind the district's proposal to let students who live around his former school attend it.

But his chief concern is one many in Louisville share: Resegregation of schools could roll back the deeper benefits of integration.

"I don't think that JCPS has gotten enough credit or stood up enough in this situation to say, 'Look how important integration is, because it leads to the kind of youth that we see today, driving the social change that makes for better society,'" he said.

Look saw that impact during the racial justice protests in Louisville after the March 13, 2020, killing of Breonna Taylor.

The crowds protesting Taylor's death were racially mixed — despite Louisville's entrenched housing segregation that has separated large parts of the city into Black and white neighborhoods.

"I got to believe, when I see my students and former colleagues out there protesting," Look said, "that's a product of an integrated school system, that you have this diversity of people that care about all people in the city.

"When I see classmates standing up for each other, knowing that they live on opposite sides of the city, and came from completely different walks of life ... that's really important."



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Yet, the district's diversity efforts have led to unintended consequences for the students who shouldered the burden of helping make it work.

One of Andrea Bailey's first memories was of not being wanted.

As a young Black girl, not yet old enough to be in school herself, she watched Louisville's 1975 anti-busing riots from inside her family's car on the way to take her older sister to school.

"It was just so, so scary to me. And I remember just thinking why are they so mad? Like what's wrong with Black people? What's wrong with us going to school with them?"



[View | 14 Photos](#)
Courier Journal archive: Photos of first year of
busing in Louisville

Diverse schools could, in time, lessen the racist vitriol of the riots. But Black students then and now found themselves on the front lines of a community's racism.

"I always felt and heard different things as if we didn't belong or didn't have a right to be there," Bailey recalled of her time being sent to a predominantly white school. "It was uncomfortable being in a space that I knew I wasn't wanted."

What busing "does to the psyche of a child is just, it's damaging, even when you don't realize that it is," Bailey said.

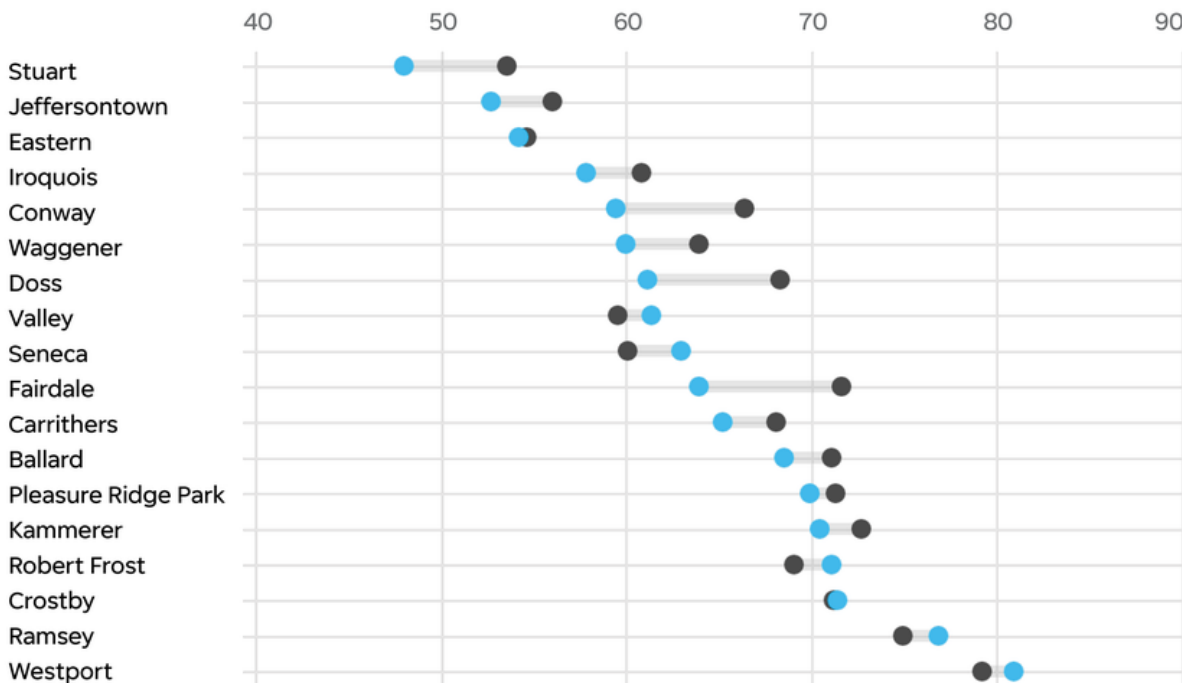
Year after year, Black students say they feel less welcome at school than their white classmates.

And those feelings tend to worsen when Black students from the West End are assigned to schools to boost diversity, district surveys show.

Does busing hurt a student's sense of belonging?

Across JCPS, Black students are less likely to feel like they fit in at school. For Black students living in the West End and assigned to middle or high schools elsewhere in the county, those feelings tend to be more pronounced.

● All Black students ● Black students from the West End



Figures shown are the percentage of each student group who said they felt as if they belong at their school.

Source: 2020 JCPS Comprehensive School Survey. MAP: Olivia Krauth/The Courier Journal. Created with Datawrapper.

The district's student assignment plan likely played a role.

Excluding magnet schools, West End kids are sorted into 50 combinations of middle and high school assignments — a byproduct of a student assignment map designed to achieve the district's diversity goals.

This can make it difficult to follow friends and teammates from middle school to high school, sometimes forcing students to start fresh while their classmates already know one another.

Living far from school can make it tricky to stay for theater rehearsals or sports practices — weakening a student's connection to their classmates and school.

As a parent, Bailey got her children on the bus early in the morning for long rides to schools outside of their neighborhood in Shively — but their treks were to district magnet schools they wanted to attend.

Integration efforts work better if they're a choice, Bailey said.

Many agree.





JEFF FAUGHENDER/COURIER JOURNAL



How can they be as invested in their own communities, when more than 50% of the day, they're not in their own communities?

COPY TEXT

TWEET

FACEBOOK

EMAIL



Jalen Harrington, 27, grew up in the West End's Parkland neighborhood, where he took the bus to an East End high school. When his family moved after his freshman year to Fern Creek, a suburban neighborhood in southeastern Jefferson County, Harrington noticed a shift.

Unlike in the West End, most kids in Fern Creek could attend a school down the street. That translated to community pride and investment in the high school and the surrounding area, he said.

Under the assignment plan, West End kids spend a significant chunk of their time outside their community.

Now the varsity football coach and a teacher at the Academy @ Shawnee, Harrington fears how that affects kids' views of their community, and by extension, how they view themselves.

“How can they be as invested in their own communities, when more than 50% of the day, they’re not in their own communities?”

Giving kids an option to stay in their own neighborhood, Harrington said, “could change a lot of the problems that we see around here.”

“Those students will be invested in Shawnee; those students will be invested in their community. And those parents will be more invested in their communities,” he said.

“At the end of the day, that’ll push for some of these parents, for some of these kids, to require some of the things that other schools have, that we don’t.”

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JBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE

THE LAST STOP

Did busing work in Jefferson County Public Schools? We fact-checked 8 claims

How much does busing cost? Are students assigned to school based on race? We fact-checked eight claims.

Elivia Krauth, Louisville Courier Journal

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If you listen to social media, Jefferson County Public Schools' diversity-driven method of assigning kids to schools is "a complete failure."

The plan designed to desegregate schools is, according to online comments, a "failed social experiment" or a "waste" of millions of dollars.

Along with contentious and often cloaked in coded language and half-truths, the debate over JCPS' desegregation efforts — better known as "busing" — has brewed in Louisville for 46 years.

We've fact-checked eight common claims, misconceptions and critiques of the district's plans for assigning students to schools.

CLAIM: All students are bused

Roughly 62,400 students ride school buses each day (except during the pandemic when in-person classes have been replaced by long-distance learning).

But only 10% of bus riders are transported specifically to make schools more diverse.

Those roughly 6,500 students — all middle and high school students predominantly from the West End — are assigned to schools outside of their neighborhood to integrate classrooms. According to JCPS, 83% of them are Black.

The term "busing" typically refers to students being transported to integrate schools.

As such, students who merely ride the bus or who ride the bus to a magnet school they chose are not considered bused.

Our rating: False



A National Guardsman watched as students arrived at Central High School during the first week of court-ordered busing in Louisville. By Bud Kamenish, The Courier-Journal. Sep. 8, 1975

BY BUD KAMENISH, THE COURIER-JOURNAL.

CLAIM: Students are assigned to schools based on the first letter of their last name

In the 1970s, at the start of JCPS' desegregation efforts, students were assigned to schools based on their last name. But the practice has since ended.

A [2018 district survey](#) found that about 10% of community members still believed the method was used. Students are now assigned based on where they live if they do not attend a magnet school.

Our rating: False

CLAIM: JCPS assigns kids to school based on their race

A 2007 U.S. Supreme Court ruling struck down JCPS' race-based assignment plan, deeming it discriminatory.

Since then, JCPS has used a combination of race, household income and adult educational attainment to measure diversity.

Our rating: False