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Education

# GOP bill could dismantle one of nation's most robust school desegregation efforts

By **Emma Brown** March 4

LOUISVILLE — A remarkable experiment in school desegregation has thrived for four decades in this Kentucky city and its suburbs, surviving fierce resistance from the Ku Klux Klan and a legal defeat at the U.S. Supreme Court.

Even as integration efforts faded across much of the South and schools nationwide have grown more segregated by race and class in recent years, Jefferson County persisted in using busing and magnet programs to strengthen diversity in the classroom.

White and black and poor and rich children share schools to a greater extent here than in most other large districts across the country, leading to friendships across the usual social divides and giving rise to what school officials say are stronger academic outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Now the program is in danger of being dismantled.

The threat is no longer from protesters in hoods throwing bricks at buses carrying black children into white parts of town, but from state legislators pushing a bill to require a return to neighborhood schools. The measure underscores the historic tension between the dueling ideals of classroom diversity and close-to-home education. If enacted, the bill would deeply shake the Jefferson district, by far the largest in Kentucky, with 101,000 students in 155 institutions.

“This is a bill that will resegregate our schools, taking us back to the '60s and '70s,” said Chris Kolb, a graduate of Jefferson schools and a member of the county school board, which opposes the measure. “This will be the death of integration.”

Kentucky's House of Representatives, with a new GOP majority, passed the bill last month, 59 to 37, with every Democrat and one Republican opposed. It is now pending in the GOP-dominated Senate, which passed similar measures twice in recent years. A spokesman for Gov. Matt Bevin (R) did not respond to a question about whether he supports the bill.

State Rep. Kevin D. Bratcher (R), sponsor of the bill, said it aims to bring common sense to a system that is unfair to children who can't get into schools around the corner or across the street from where they live. Bratcher, who is white and represents part of Jefferson County, said he is sensitive to concerns about resegregation.

“But we have to look at what we're giving up for desegregation,” he said. It's harder for children in faraway schools to participate in extracurricular activities, he said, and for their parents to make it to PTA meetings and teacher conferences. What's more, he said, busing costs student time and taxpayer money that could be better spent.

Bratcher cited his own experience in a county high school in the 1970s, when he was forced to leave his neighborhood and take a bus to a historically black school 45 minutes away. “Sending a child to a school just right down the street is a powerful benefit,” he said.

Many in Louisville, a Democratic stronghold, chafe at the notion that Republicans — known as the party of local control — want to override the wishes of local officials. Not

only does the school board support desegregation via busing, but voters in board elections also have consistently rejected candidates who pledged a return to neighborhood schools.

“Local control as a principle goes out the window at convenience,” said Raoul Cunningham, president of the NAACP’s Louisville chapter.

Two-thirds of the district’s students come from low-income families. Nearly half are white, 37 percent are black, and 9 percent are Hispanic.

The vast majority of schools meet the district’s diversity target, which is determined by a complex calculation. Fewer than 15 percent of students attend a school in which either the white or nonwhite student population exceeds three-quarters of total enrollment, a Pennsylvania State University researcher found.

Under the bill, more than half of students in the district would be moved to a new school.

Opponents say that would wreak havoc, overcrowding some schools and leaving others half-empty. They also say the bill contradicts the Republican push for school choice.

Jefferson County long ago replaced the forced busing of the 1970s with a voluntary approach to integration, offering arts- and science-themed magnet programs to draw students into different parts of town.

The bill would effectively eliminate many of those programs by requiring the district to allow children to attend the school closest to their homes. Such a provision is race-neutral on its face, but the deeply segregated housing patterns in the sprawling county mean that a return to neighborhood schools is likely to concentrate poor and minority students in schools apart from their white, affluent peers.

Research shows that isolating poor children is an ill-advised strategy for schools looking to boost low-income learning. Jefferson schools still struggle with achievement gaps — 61 percent of white elementary students are proficient or better in

reading, compared with 31 percent of black students and 43 percent of Latino students. But the district has found that children in poor areas who attend mixed-income schools outperform neighbors who go to high-poverty schools.

State Rep. Attica Scott (D), who is African American and represents part of Jefferson, was bused while growing up in the late 1970s and 1980s from a low-income, largely black housing development to a school in a predominantly white neighborhood. Then she attended a magnet high school with students from across the county.

“For me, it was this opportunity to be with kids who weren’t like me — to be able to develop those relationships and connections and to get to know each other in ways that would not have been possible without busing,” Scott said.

Although the system has flaws, Scott said, “I don’t believe we throw out this entire attempt of integrating.”

Hannah Drake said her daughter — who now has a full scholarship to the University of Kentucky — woke up at 5:30 a.m. to catch the bus across town to a better school. “It was taxing,” said Drake, who is black. “But when you look at it, what is the alternative? To send them to a school in your neighborhood which is predominantly African American and has economic challenges? They’re not going to get the same kind of education.”

Courts have released hundreds of school districts from desegregation orders in the past several decades, and many of those have dropped their diversity efforts. But Jefferson County, which was released in 2000, persisted. In 2007, it lost a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case in which justices struck down the district’s use of racial identity of individual students to determine school assignments.

The district then retooled its plan to use the demographics of census tracts in which students live — including racial makeup, income and educational attainment — to ensure diversity at schools.

Since that change, segregation has increased slightly, according to Erica Frankenberg,

the Penn State researcher who helped develop the county's plan and has studied its effects. Neighborhood schooling would lead to significant resegregation, she said — and once it is gone, diversity is hard to bring back. “I think that's a harder lift politically than just continuing,” she said.

Twelve schools now fall short of the district's standard for enrollment diversity. If the neighborhood schools bill passes, the district predicts that the total will climb to 40.

Under the current system, parents of elementary students can choose from a cluster of five to eight schools based on their home address, some of which may not be nearby, or they can apply to districtwide magnet programs. Ninety percent of incoming kindergartners are assigned their first-choice cluster school, the district said.

But Peter Massey said the system failed his family. He chose for his daughter a high-performing elementary school near their home. “Three left-hand turns and we're there, about a mile away,” he said. She didn't get in. Instead, she was assigned to a low-performing school almost 14 miles away in a predominantly black neighborhood.

Massey, who is white, enrolled her in a Catholic school. It wasn't race that determined that choice, he said, but distance. The public school was simply too far away. Massey said he supports the bill because, as it is now, “you can't even plan what your children's future is, in terms of what school they're going to go to.”

Debate over the bill does not split entirely along racial lines. Jerry Stephenson, a black pastor, told a Kentucky House committee that he supports the bill because busing had not changed the fact that too many black children are unable to read on grade level.

“Our problem today is our children. They get on a little yellow school bus, and they're bused off, and they're saying you can't get a good education in your neighborhood. And then they go out there and they get a bad education,” Stephenson said. “Something's got to change.”

Middle and high school students are assigned to a school based on their home address, with boundaries drawn to promote diversity. They can also apply to magnet schools,

which under the bill would be allowed to continue operating as they do now, or magnet programs within neighborhood schools, which district officials say would be squeezed out.

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Magnet programs are generally more diverse than the neighborhoods in which they are located. “If you go to a homogenous school, you don’t have that diversity of thought,” said Chris Burba, principal of Meyzeek Middle School, a neighborhood school with a math and science magnet program in Smoketown, a historically black section of Louisville.

Meyzeek’s demographics would shift dramatically if the bill becomes law. The share of low-income students would jump from 44 percent to 79 percent, according to the district, and the share of nonwhite students would rise from 55 percent to 77 percent.

To many in Jefferson County, that’s unacceptable.

“My school is awesome. I have lots of friendly classmates. They’re from all over,” said Butch Borgemenke-Batcheldor, 10, a fourth-grader at Goldsmith Elementary. He accompanied his father one recent evening to a rally against the bill.

People who go to schools that lack diversity “only see a minority of the community,” Butch said. “And that will stop them later in life when they have to do important things.”

Emma Brown writes about national education and about people with a stake in schools, including teachers, parents and kids.

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