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Should Buffalo Move Back to Neighborhood Public Schools?

Abstract

It is a school where the majority of its students come from the neighborhood surrounding it. Aside from private or magnet schools, students must attend the school assigned to their neighborhood. This is no longer the model in Buffalo or in many cities. For the past forty years schools have bussed students across the district. Today there is a debate as to whether Buffalo Public Schools should return to the neighborhood school model.

Keywords

Buffalo, Education, K-12 Education, Policy Brief, PPG, PDF

SHOULD BUFFALO MOVE BACK TO NEIGHBORHOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

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What is a neighborhood school?

It is a school where the majority of its students come from the neighborhood surrounding it. Aside from private or magnet schools, students must attend the school assigned to their neighborhood. This is no longer the model in Buffalo or in many cities. For the past forty years schools have bussed students across the district.¹ Today there is a debate as to whether Buffalo Public Schools should return to the neighborhood school model.

When did Buffalo leave the neighborhood school system?

In the 1970s, a series of Supreme Court decisions required all schools to desegregate. It didn't matter whether the segregation was the result of local laws² or had occurred in practice³, or whether it was in the South⁴ or in the North⁵. Black and white students were integrated into the same classrooms on a district wide basis⁶ "with all deliberate speed."⁷ The only way to accomplish this was to bus students from one neighborhood to another until they were sufficiently mixed.

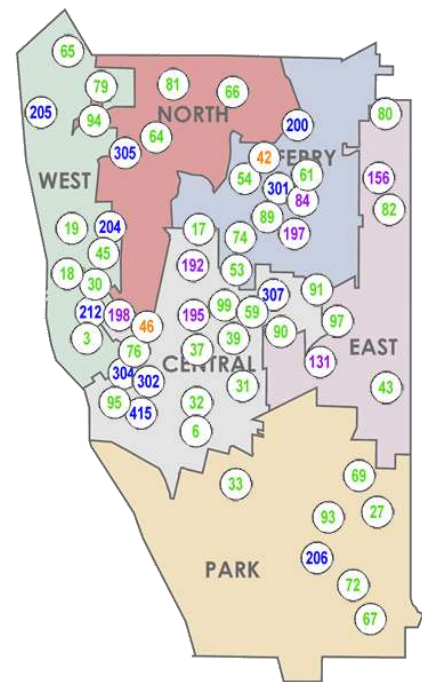
How does that system affect school choice today?

The bussing requirement was lifted in 1996, but bussing continues in Buffalo under an open enrollment program.⁸ The decision to keep bussing allows families to choose where their children attend school. Currently, 54% of children attend their first choice school and 20% attend their second choice school.⁹

Would neighborhood schools help the students?

Students spend an average of 25 minutes on the bus each way.¹² That amounts to an extra school day a week riding on the bus. Neighborhood schools at least offer the option of walking or biking to school. This creates health benefits in a district where physical education and recess have seen the chopping

Location of Buffalo Public Schools



Legend

- Elementary PK-8
- High Schools 9-12
- Middle-High 5-12
- Adult Ed

block. A short burst of moderate exercise could improve the physical and mental health of the entire student body. However, because Buffalo’s population has fallen from over 600,000 to roughly 260,000, the city is not as densely populated as it once was, and neighborhood schools would have to draw from a fairly large neighborhood – meaning that many students would still ride the bus, even to a neighborhood school. Neighborhood schools might also pose a problem for students who are experiencing homelessness or a high degree of involuntary housing mobility by forcing them to switch schools more often – when their families move to new neighborhoods.

Would neighborhood schools help parents and teachers?

Only about one half of the city’s population has personal transportation.¹³ If a student misses the bus, it may be hard for the parent to get that child to school, and often the student simply stays home. In addition, many parents have never been to their child’s school. Without a car, the time and cost of travel may be too much for them to attend a parent teacher conference or PTA meeting. If the school were nearby, traveling would not be such a burden and there would be more potential for parent involvement.

Teachers become recognized figures within the communities they teach.¹⁴ Teachers are currently removed from the home life of many of their students. In the neighborhood school setting, the teachers would gain a better sense of the children’s environment.

Neighborhood schools also free up resources that could be spent otherwise. Buffalo Public schools spend roughly 5% of the total budget or \$40 million per year on transportation.¹⁸ If neighborhood schools slash a quarter of that budget, there would be \$10 million extra to spend on after school programs, arts, athletics, music, and nutrition.



Can today’s school infrastructure support a return to neighborhood schools?

Over the past 40 years, as the city’s population fell, schools needed to close. With city-wide bussing, the school district did not have to consider what closing a school would do to a neighborhood. Since the 1970s, Buffalo has closed roughly a dozen schools across the city, many of which were located in the city’s poorest neighborhoods.¹⁹

Reverting back to the neighborhood school pattern would leave some neighborhoods without a school nearby. That said, most residential zones have at the very least an elementary school within walking distance. There would be a few areas, primarily in the East Side, that would be underserved.²⁰ The most obvious solution would be to rebuild or reopen schools in underserved areas, but this would be very expensive.

Would the school system return to racially and economically segregated classrooms?

Not much has changed in neighborhood racial composition since the plan to desegregate schools was implemented. In fact, many neighborhoods have become more racially concentrated.²¹ Going back to the neighborhood school model would result in many schools becoming more racially and economically homogenous.

The East Side of Buffalo has the highest concentration of African Americans and some of the highest rates of poverty. The East Delavan, Ellicott, and Masten communities in and around the East side are 70%-80% African American.²² Roughly half of the population in those neighborhoods are living at or below the poverty line.²³ Only 25% of African American males graduate from high school in Buffalo.²⁴ Neighborhood schools in this area would concentrate the school population most in need in just a couple of schools and along racial lines. This might not only undo efforts to desegregate, but might also leave the segregated community in a far worse position than they were in 50 years ago.

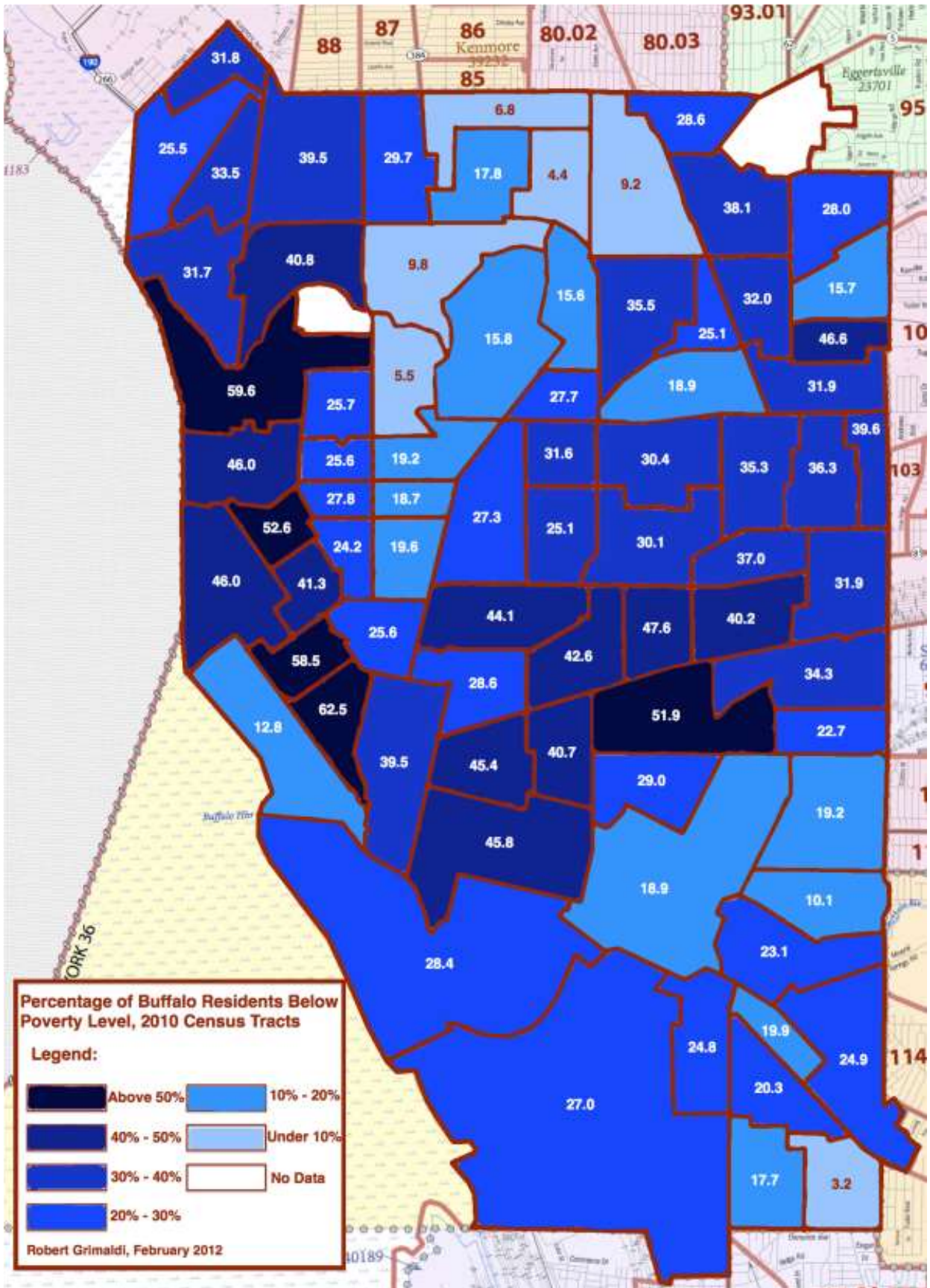
Does the community support a return to neighborhood schools?

A survey in late 2011 found that a strong majority(60%) of Buffalo parents wanted their child to attend a neighborhood school.²⁹ Support was strongest among parents of first-graders, with 65% favoring that option.³⁰ Interest was lowest among parents of eighth-graders, with 53% favoring neighborhood schools.³¹ This matches the vision of many pro-neighborhood school activists. School Board member Ralph Hernandez supports starting neighborhood schools at the elementary level and continuing to let upper level students attend the school of their choice.³² Such a plan also would not affect magnet or test-in schools because those half dozen schools are largely for older students.³³

How could the school system transition back?

A more gradual option would begin by setting aside a certain proportion of classroom seats at a particular school that would go to neighborhood children.³⁴ However, this may have the same effect as the current system. The “good” school’s quota of neighborhood students will always be filled and the under achieving school’s quota for neighborhood students will always be unfilled. In the absence of an overwhelming majority’s will to send their child to the neighborhood school, a gradual or partial neighborhood school will make little difference.

The only way to quickly create true neighborhood schools is to require students in the area around a school to attend that school. The open enrollment system would have to be abandoned at particular grade levels or the system would fall apart. Currently, 90% of parents are choosing schools where their child needs to be bussed.³⁵ Parents may support neighborhood schools in principle, but they are not sending their children to them. Perhaps parents want their kids to go to the neighborhood school, but they cannot get in because the school is already at capacity. Or, more likely, the school option system creates the mindset among parents to send their children to the schools with the best reputations, similar to ‘the grass is always greener’ mentality. As one parent stated “The next generation of students can build neighborhood schools; my child needs a good education now.”



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- ³ *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Bd. of Ed.*, 402 U.S. 1, 91 S. Ct. 1267, 28 L. Ed. 2d 554 (U.S.N.C. 1971)
- ⁴ *Green v. County Sch. Bd. of New Kent County, Va.*, 391 U.S. 430, 88 S. Ct. 1689, 20 L. Ed. 2d 716 (1968)
- ⁵ *Keyes v. Sch. Dist. No. 1, Denver, Colo.*, 413 U.S. 189, 93 S. Ct. 2686, 37 L. Ed. 2d 548 (1973)
- ⁶ *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717, 94 S. Ct. 3112, 41 L. Ed. 2d 1069 (1974)
- ⁷ *Brown v. Bd. of Educ. of Topeka, Kan.*, 349 U.S. 294, 75 S. Ct. 753, 99 L. Ed. 1083 (1955)
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- ¹⁰ Samuel Radford. District Parent Coordinating Council President. Personal Communication. 2/15/13
- ¹¹ Fuller, Bruce, Richard F. Elmore, and Gary Orfield. *Who Chooses? Who Loses?: Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice*. New York: Teachers College, 1996.
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³⁰ Id.

³¹ Id.

³²“Leaders suggest ways to return Buffalo to neighborhood schools.” WBFO 88.7 NPR News and More.
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³³ Id.

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