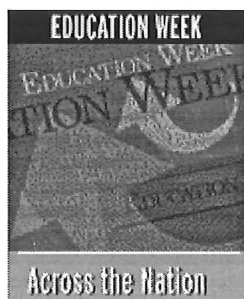


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Seattle To Shelve Race-Based Busing In Shift Toward Neighborhood Schools

By

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Responding to public discontent over its methods of assigning students, the Seattle school district has decided to phase out race-based busing to allow more students to attend neighborhood schools.

Under its existing voluntary desegregation plan, the district buses some elementary students across town in an effort to keep schools within racial-balance guidelines.

That policy will end next fall, and elementary students will be able to choose from among any school in the 47,000-student district, as middle and high school students are now allowed to do.

Unlike many other urban school systems, Seattle has never been under court order to desegregate. But it voluntarily started mandatory, race-based student assignments in 1973.

The school board's change of direction, which has drawn fire from civil rights and civil liberties groups, is part of a broader plan to reallocate money, staff, and programs. The plan, approved Nov. 20, is designed to enable children to attend neighborhood schools while devoting extra resources to disadvantaged students.

"Our goal is to implement a comprehensive plan within available resources to increase student achievement by promoting quality schools close to home," Superintendent John H. Stanford wrote in a recent newsletter describing the plan.

Busing Burden Cited

Board members cited two primary reasons for ending the unpopular busing program. First, the burden of lengthy bus rides fell disproportionately on nonwhite youngsters from the district's poorer neighborhoods. And second, the program had failed to improve achievement among nonwhite students, especially African-Americans.

District officials argued that parent involvement suffered among bused students, who are often the ones who need it most to overcome their disadvantages.

Douglas Honig, the public education director of the Washington state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the policy switch would promote segregation.

"The school district has conceded that some schools will be more segregated, and that's our concern," he said. "We see this plan as a major step backward from integrated education."

Seattle school officials say they will still strive for racial balance but noted that some schools fail to meet district guidelines already. District policy calls for nonwhite enrollment to stay within 25 percentage points of the districtwide proportion of minority students, or between 34 and 84 percent.

Under the new assignment policy, students whose attendance at a school would improve its racial balance will get priority if a school is oversubscribed.

The recent change begins a three-year process that will, among other things, scrap the current race-conscious system of clustering schools for attendance purposes and replace it with one based on geographic proximity. The plan, which is still being developed, will likely channel more resources to poorer, largely nonwhite communities, district officials say.

It is also expected to entail relocating school-based programs that had been designed to lure students from one part of the city to another.

"We're in the cocoon stage right now," said Dorothy Dubia, a spokeswoman for the district. "We expect to be a butterfly when it's all over."

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