

THE MILWAUKEE MEDIA AND DESEGREGATION OF MPS SCHOOLS

Setting The Record Straight

George Mitchell, January 2026

Half a century has passed since federal Judge John Reynolds directed the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to desegregate classrooms. The adverse impact of the plan to implement his ruling continues to this day.

This month, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel published an article and a separate column noting the 50-year milestone. Errors of omission and/or commission in each piece recall the Milwaukee media's key early missteps in covering the desegregation story. Readers then and now have been left without important facts.

Why does this matter? Because uncorrected journalistic errors are consequential. In this case, flawed coverage that followed the Reynolds ruling left readers without a serious examination of the desegregation plan. The Milwaukee Journal and Milwaukee Sentinel came up short because they did not want to rock the boat. The need to do exactly that was left to others.

What's clear in hindsight was apparent to some at the time of the plan's development and implementation. The plan's defects undermined potential benefits from ending segregation.

Of greatest importance, as the busing map on page 5 illustrates, the plan made impossible actual *integration* of Black and white students. That objective was subordinated to a different goal, namely, ensuring that the plan had the least impact on white students and families. Limiting the impact on white students required Black students to bear most of the impact.

While some leaders in the Black community alleged this at the time, the media variously dismissed their skepticism or treated their views as "claims." The actual evidence supporting their concerns escaped media analysis. Fortright acknowledgement of a "white benefit" agenda by key MPS sources did not occur until the late 1990s.

Had those Black leaders received an objective hearing, the actual course of the desegregation story likely would have been quite different. Instead, after the expenditure of hundreds of millions in state tax dollars, conditions arguably are worse.

Milwaukee is more segregated. The academic achievement gap between Black and white students is worse.

The assessment I offer reflects decades of involvement in Milwaukee education issues. With respect to desegregation, I had a front row seat in the pivotal early years.

- In **1976**, I worked in Governor Pat Lucey's office. Judge Reynolds named John Gronouski, a close ally of Lucey and Reynolds, to oversee implementation of the ruling. The expectation in the East Wing was that Gronouski would deliver a workable plan, a view largely shared by the Milwaukee civic establishment and the newsrooms and editorial boards of the Journal and the Sentinel.
- In **1982**, my family encountered the impact of desegregation plan first hand. We moved to Milwaukee, intending to buy a home in the city. I met with MPS staff to learn what schools our daughters might attend. After discussing options, MPS staff learned that our adopted daughters are not white. Their options were restricted dramatically based on race. We bought a home in Shorewood.
- In **1984 and 1985**, I chaired an independent commission named by Governor Tony Earl and DPI Superintendent Bert Grover to examine public schools in metro Milwaukee. Our work overlapped the early years of implementation of the desegregation plan. An important part of our mission was to fill an information vacuum created by MPS, the Journal, and the Sentinel.
- **Later in the 1980s**, I authored papers for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (now the Badger Institute) that analyzed the cost, extent, and impact of programs used to implement the Reynolds decision.

The Journal and Sentinel were heavily invested in the validity and success of the plan implemented, with Gronouski's approval, by MPS Superintendent Lee McMurrin.

Howard Fuller intervened to do what the compliant media did not.

Then a member of Governor Tony Earl's cabinet, he asked questions that reporters should have posed. He sought proof of academic gains. He suggested the desegregation plan had a disproportionate impact on Black students, families, and neighborhoods.

Fuller was not alone in expressing concerns. Larry Harwell, who later served as chief of staff for State Rep. Polly Williams, called for Black and white families to to bear the

impact of desegregation equally. He founded Blacks for Two-Way Integration; its motto was “two-way or no way.” Harwell and other critics in the Black community typically were portrayed as race-based opponents of desegregation.

The critics were correct. In 1984, a report from the state’s nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau confirmed that “the impact [of busing]...has fallen more on black students and on black families than it has on white students and white families.” In 1985, Fuller fully documented that fact in a comprehensive doctoral dissertation at Marquette University.

Academic Achievement — “At or above average”?

A staple of Journal and Sentinel reporting was acceptance of McMurrin’s assertion that MPS students were performing “at or above average,” a claim that reinforced a view that the desegregation plan was producing positive results.

Fuller didn’t buy it. Stonewalled by MPS in seeking information to corroborate or refute McMurrin, he turned to Governor Earl and DPI Superintendent Grover.

At Fuller’s urging, they created and funded an independent commission to examine the performance of public schools in metro Milwaukee. I was named chair, owing to an active policy role in Democratic administrations during the 1970s.

For two years, with the able assistance of a staff directed by UW Professor John Witte, we took a deep dive into the workings of MPS and suburban Milwaukee school districts. In January of 1986, the national publication *Education Week* headlined a lengthy report on our findings: “Massive Milwaukee Study Reveals Quality Gap.”

Under our microscope, the claim that most MPS students were “at or above average” unraveled. A key moment during the study came when I asked the MPS research director for justification of that claim. He offered an arcane statistical definition that put students “at or above average” even when they had scored *below* the 50th percentile mean most commonly used to denote “average.”

Professor Witte’s staff extracted data that had been denied Fuller. Indeed, it turned out that most Black students scored *below* the 50th percentile, information that McMurrin had suppressed in response to Fuller’s queries.

When our findings were published, I was beset with calls from school principals saying we had it wrong. They had been told by MPS central administration that their students were at or above average, a claim echoed in the media. Most responded to my explanation with stony silence. They had been duped, as had been the media and the public.

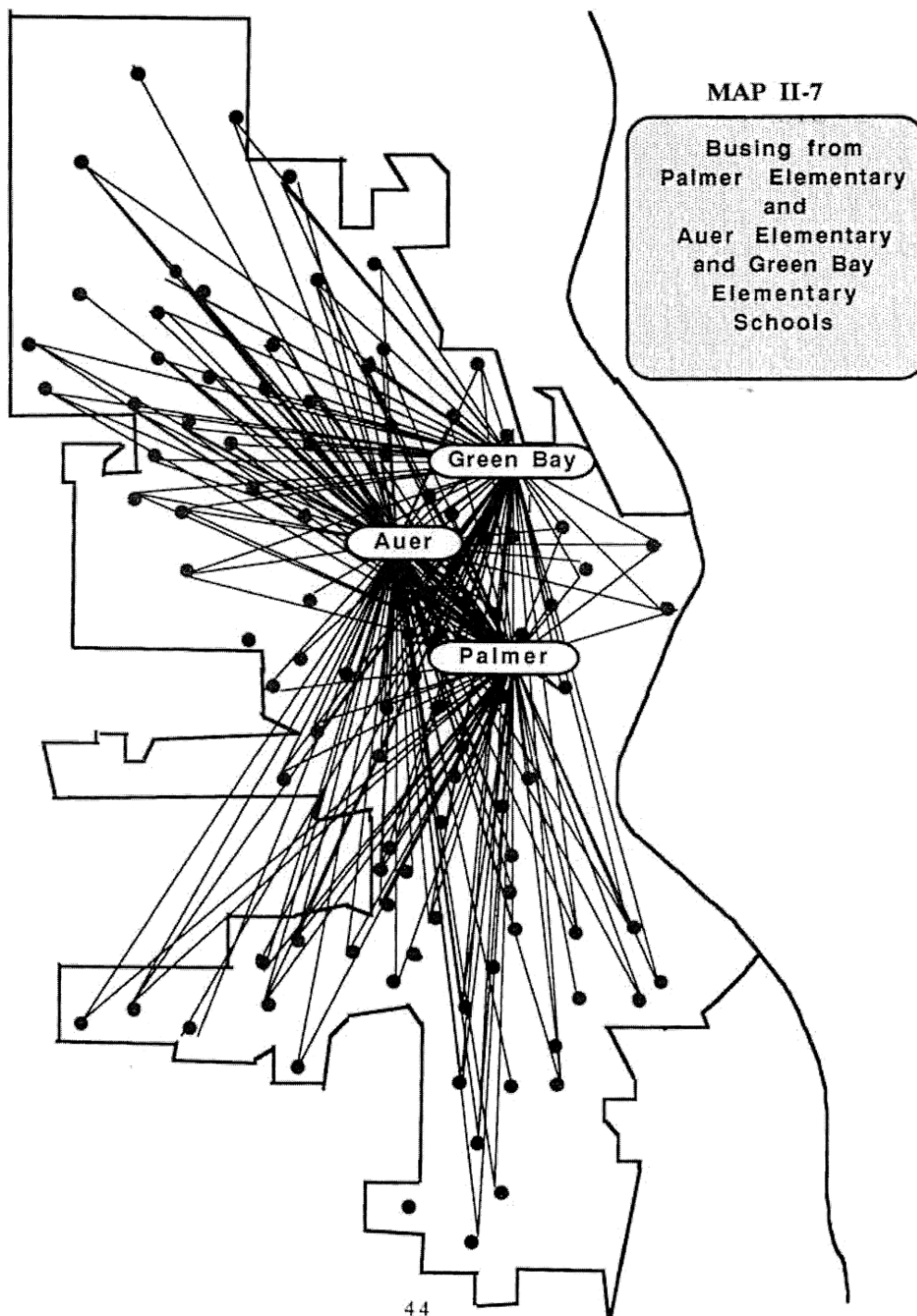
While the Journal and Sentinel accurately reported our findings, they failed to report the critical point: McMurrin had foisted disinformation on the press and the public. Rather than address that, the papers chose to move on.

Nonetheless, the impact of the commission's work was noteworthy. Fuller's push to create an independent commission had an impact.

- McMurrin's credibility dropped markedly. He resigned in 1987.
- The Public Policy Forum initiated annual reports disclosing the kind of data that McMurrin had suppressed.
- And, most significantly, support grew for giving parents more options, an idea Fuller, Harwell, and Rep. Polly Williams had championed. Fuller was invited to speak to meetings attended by most state legislators. Within four years, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) was enacted, launching a national movement. (Notably, the Milwaukee press failed to report this development for several days.)

The Disproportionate Impact of the Desegregation Plan

The history of desegregation in Milwaukee almost certainly would have been different had the map on page 5 been public when the desegregation plan was implemented. The map was published in 1989 in a report I authored for the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (WPRI). It shows how Black students in three inner city neighborhoods were bused to more than 100 schools across the city. The 113-page report shows similar busing pattern in *scores of other Black neighborhoods* on Milwaukee's North Side.



No one who actually understood this plan could possibly conclude that it would lead to genuine integration. Black students spent hours riding buses to and from largely white schools in distant parts of the city. They arrived in time to attend classes and boarded buses after classes to return to their neighborhoods. Parent involvement with schools became far more difficult. Receiving schools had little way to include bused students in extracurricular activities. The only measurable outcome was a body count showing “progress” in achieving desegregation.

The WPRI report validated concerns that Fuller and others had raised prior to and during early implementation of the Reynolds ruling. It confirmed Fuller’s meticulous documentation in his 1985 doctoral thesis of the disproportionate impact on Black students, families, and neighborhoods.

Education reporters for the Sentinel and Milwaukee Journal received embargoed copies of the report prior to public release. Upon review, reporter Jeff Cole of the Sentinel told me simply, “We should have had this,” acknowledging that the report covered ground the Milwaukee newspapers had not touched. He cited: (1) maps that depicted busing patterns; (2) the report’s extensive information on the fiscal cost of desegregation (\$335 million between 1976 and 1988 to support busing); (3) the lack of academic progress; and (4) flaws in the separate city-suburban integration program.

Despite the report’s far-reaching findings, a Journal editor informed me, through a reporter, that if the report was released first to the Sentinel it would be published inside the Journal as “mostly old news.” That’s how it played out — a front page Sentinel story followed that afternoon by an inside Journal story quoting an MPS official who said it added little new to discussion.

(The WPRI report was subsequently labeled the “Mitchell Report” by the Wisconsin Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee cited it heavily in a 1992 Committee report to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. See References.)

Milwaukee Magazine was one publication that did not dismiss the issue of disproportionate impact on Black students. See *Afterword* below.

“White Benefit”

The Reynolds’ ruling was not unexpected within MPS. When Gronouski arrived on the scene, internal MPS planning was well underway. It focused on the impact on white residents, signaling beliefs and assumptions that produced the kind of busing program depicted in the map above.

As Fuller reported in his doctoral thesis: “MPS stated...that providing for whites ‘the psychological guarantee of not having to attend a school that is predominantly minority will tend to stabilize the population in the city.’ This statement is a clear indication of the [MPS] Administration’s intent from the very outset to emphasize first and foremost the concerns of whites.” His basis was a 1976 MPS document titled “Comprehensive Plan for Increasing Educational Opportunities and Improving Racial Balance in the Milwaukee Public Schools.”

Not until 1999 — more than two decades after the Reynolds decision — did the Journal Sentinel address clearly the magnitude of this issue. Once again, as explained below, it did so only because of Fuller.

Fuller’s thesis notes that the issue of white benefit drew the attention of Journal education reporter David Bednarek. Fuller wrote: “In 1977, Dave Bednarek...raised the question of the burden on black students with Superintendent Lee McMurrin. McMurrin replied [emphasis added], ‘That whole concept of burden in Milwaukee is ridiculous. It is ridiculous to talk of burden when the parents and students are moving **voluntarily**. It would be very difficult for the court to object to black parents opting out of containment into a desegregated opportunity.’”

McMurrin’s explanation apparently was good enough for Bednarek and the paper. For years, articles and editorials advanced the narrative that the plan was “voluntary.”

In fact, Black parents in segregated neighborhoods had no option but to select from a choice of three schools in largely white neighborhoods. Their choice was “voluntary” in the narrowest sense; they had three options and MPS thus could claim they “chose” the school where their children were bused. One observer correctly called the plan “forced choice,” tailored to achieve the numeric desegregation goals established in the Reynolds ruling. Indeed, no one could look at the map above and assert it reflected truly voluntary choices of Black parents.

But the map was not known to the public. Those who feared rocking the boat knew that a serious exploration of white benefit would contradict the narrative of peaceful desegregation. The comforting theme that held sway with Milwaukee’s civic leadership was a commitment to the “Chapter 220 process,” a reference to state legislation that funded supposedly *voluntary* transfers of pupils (within MPS and between Milwaukee and suburban districts) to achieve desegregation. Yet the result, as first documented by Fuller and validated in the Mitchell Report, was a plan that:

- Limited options available to central city Black students to vacant seats in white neighborhood schools miles from their neighborhoods;

- Sent the minority of white students who were bused primarily to other white neighborhoods; and
- Sent most whites who were bused to the central city to desirable, admission-restricted “specialty schools,” displacing Black students who then had to be bused to outlying white neighborhoods.

David Bennett Comes Clean

MPS Deputy Superintendent David Bennett played a key early role in shaping the desegregation plan. In 1999, then the superintendent of a Florida school district, he appeared on a panel discussion of race and education issues sponsored by the Helen Bader Foundation. Prodded by questions from Fuller, he acknowledged that “white benefit” drove the plan’s key features.

When education reporter Joe Williams learned of the event, he pursued the topic. The result was the following headline and subhead in the Journal Sentinel:

‘White benefit’ was driving force of busing

*20 years later, architects of MPS plan admit they
didn't want to disrupt city's white residents*

Williams’ October 19, 1999 article began:

“In a stunning admission more than two decades after the fact, the architects of Milwaukee's school busing plan now say the entire plan was set up for “white benefit” at the expense of African-American children.”

Williams reached out to key players at the time the desegregation plan was developed. For example:

“I think it [white benefit] was an unspoken issue with the School Board at the time,” said Anthony Busalacchi, president of the School Board in 1978-'79. “It was an issue of how do we least disrupt the white community.”

From former MPS School Board member Joyce Mallory: *“What really hurts now is when I look at all these kids in prison, a lot of that is the result of thousands of kids not getting a good education and being forced, pushed and dropped out of MPS in the last 20 years....A lot of them dropped out because going to [predominantly white schools] weren’t places where they could be educated in a climate and an environment that valued who they were as individuals.”*

The Journal Sentinel Marks the 50th Anniversary

The Journal Sentinel published a January 14, 2026 article by education reporter Kayla Huynh. Its headline: *“50 years after court order on desegregation in MPS, what's changed?”*

A January 16 column by Alan Borsuk followed. Its headline: *“MPS desegregation efforts were an earthquake that didn't produce a better landscape”*

Neither piece refers to Fuller's role, his doctoral thesis, the work of the 1980s study commission, the Mitchell Report, or, amazingly, the Joe Williams story. Such omissions amount to air-brushing the history of the Reynolds ruling, one correctly characterized in one headline as “an earthquake.”

So, once again, readers will not learn that the desegregation plan was designed for “white benefit” and then justified with misleading information on student performance. Both pieces make only glancing references to the topic, one that determined *the entire trajectory of the desegregation plan*. Once again, readers will not learn that MPS misrepresented academic results to make it appear the program was successful.

Notably, Borsuk, who has an extensive history of covering Milwaukee education issues, does provide an interesting perspective from Judge Reynolds.

Borsuk reports that Reynolds, in an 1997 “oral history” interview with a federal court official, stated that “I don't think busing really helps... Whatever support people have in their neighborhoods, in their families, to pull them away from that was not a good idea. It didn't work out well.”

Indeed.

Afterword

Coincidental irony accompanies the 50th anniversary of the Reynolds ruling. After *fifty years* of busing mostly Black students away from their home and expenditures in the hundreds of millions, state taxpayer support for desegregation finally is being phased out.

As the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau reported last year (emphasis added):

“Under the integration aid program (commonly called Chapter 220 after the 1975 session law), the state provides funds as an incentive for districts to **voluntarily improve racial balance** within and between school districts. The program **is being phased out** under the provisions of 2015 Act 55 (the 2015-17 biennial budget act), with participation limited to pupils who were in the program in the 2015-16 school year.”

Sadly, as the headline on Borsuk’s column correctly observed, “a better landscape” decidedly did not result. Aggressive reporting in the early years might have changed things. The two major newspapers came up short.

The Mitchell Report notes an exception to that failure: a 1987 Milwaukee Magazine story by Bruce Murphy and John Pawasarat that correctly identified conclusions that Fuller and the state’s Audit Bureau had reached regarding the disproportionate impact on Black students.

More recently, a 2019 Urban Milwaukee column by Murphy (“The Truth About Busing”) deemed busing “a political failure.” Inexplicably, however, Murphy added, “But while it may have been a political failure, busing for desegregation was clearly an educational success.” He cites no Milwaukee data to support that claim: doing so would be quite a challenge, because no such data exist. Murphy instead cites research from other communities outside of Wisconsin — no consolation at all for the Black families who made “forced choices” and the state taxpayers who paid the bill.

References

The history of the MPS desegregation plan is complex. Key developments long precede the Reynolds ruling. This paper's focus is narrower; it identifies media shortcomings after the ruling was issued. Comprehensive historical reviews include:

- “FROM NO CHOICE TO FORCED CHOICE TO SCHOOL CHOICE: A HISTORY OF EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS IN MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS,” a 2012 doctoral dissertation submitted at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee by James K. Nelsen.
- “Against the Wind: African Americans & the Schools in Milwaukee,” 1963–2002, by Bill Dahlk, Marquette University Press.

Sources cited in this paper are as follows:

“The Impact of the Milwaukee Public School System’s Desegregation Plan on Black Students and the Black Community (1976-1982),” doctoral thesis, Howard Fuller, Marquette University, May 1985.

“Better Public Schools,” final report of the Study Commission on the Quality of Education in Metropolitan Milwaukee Public Schools, George Mitchell, chair, Professor John Witte, staff director, October 1985.

“An Evaluation of State Financed School Integration in Metropolitan Milwaukee,” George Mitchell, Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, June 1989. Mitchell authored separate WPRI reports on a city-suburban desegregation program.

“Impact of School Desegregation in Milwaukee Public Schools on Quality Education for Minorities...15 Years Later,” Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, August 1992.

“50 years after court order on desegregation in MPS, what's changed?” Kayla Huynh, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, January 14, 2026.

“MPS desegregation efforts were an earthquake that didn’t produce a better landscape,” Alan Borsuk, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, January 16, 2026.