

3- The Battle Over School Integration

by Joyce Kenny

During the 1960's, many Long Island communities were strongly divided over the issue of racial integration of public schools. This issue was particularly heated because many white residents of Long Island had moved to the suburbs from New York City as urban communities and public schools became increasingly non-white.²⁹ The battle over Long Island schools intensified in response to the national debate over racial integration and because of concern among many white Long Islanders that the New York State Department of Education would require either the consolidation of largely Black and white school districts or inter-district school busing to end school segregation.

Because of the importance of education for families with children and because of the impact of school systems on tax rates and property values, battles over racial integration on Long Island frequently focused on schools. During the 1960's, Freeport's school board tried to end racial segregation within the district's schools by transferring Black pupils between neighboring schools.³⁰ In Amityville, civil rights advocates picketed racially segregated schools and threatened economic and school boycotts unless the district's schools were integrated.³¹ In Hempstead, with a rapidly expanding African American population, parents and the local school board supported a proposal to prevent racial segregation by merging the Hempstead school district with the neighboring, predominately white, Garden City and Uniondale school districts. However both Uniondale and Garden City resisted the plan.³² From 1967 to 1969, Great Neck debated whether to bus a small number of African American students from Queens into the district. When large numbers of Great Neck parents organized to block the integration plan, it was abandoned.³³

Across Long Island, school budget votes were influenced by battles over racial integration. The Glen Cove school board told the State Commissioner of Education that the school busing costs would have to be covered by increased state funds.³⁴ In Oceanside, racial issues were so charged that unsubstantiated rumors about the possibility of integrating the district's schools led to the defeat of the local school budget in 1966.³⁵

One of the sharpest battles on Long Island over school integration in the 1960's was fought in Malverne. It pitted a group of largely African American parents, the Tri-Community Council for Intergroup Relations (later known as the United Committee for Action Now), committed to school integration as a step towards racial equality, against a group of overwhelmingly white parents, Taxpayers and Parents Association, who argued that the primary issue was the right of parents to send their children to neighborhood schools.³⁶

On June 13, 1963, a New York Times headline read, "Integration Plan for L.I. is Urged." According to the article, Robert Carter, a lawyer for the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), was representing a group of parents from the Malverne school district who wanted the New York State Commissioner of Education to "order the Malverne School District to reorganize attendance areas to end what is called de facto segregation." This request set off a storm in Malverne and across Long Island. An editorial in the Hempstead Beacon reported that the effort to challenge racial segregation in Malverne "appears to have raised more questions than provided answers."³⁷

The Malverne school district, with three local elementary schools, presented a perfect example of the problem of racial segregation in Long Island schools and an ideal opportunity to challenge it. Students in one Malverne elementary school, Woodfield Road School, were from the predominately African-American neighborhood of Lakeview. Students in the two other schools were predominately white. Parents of Woodfield Road students spearheaded the school integration campaign out of concern that their children were receiving an inferior education.

Acting on the recommendation of a statewide advisory panel, Dr. James E. Allen, Jr., the New York State Commissioner of Education, approved a plan to integrate Malverne's elementary schools by assigning Malverne children to each of the three schools for different grades.³⁸ In August, 1963, the school board's request to reopen the case was denied, however, a white parent secured a temporary restraining order from the New York State Supreme Court that blocked implementation of the school integration plan.³⁹ This court decision established a pattern that continued for the next three years as white parents and the Malverne school board sought to either overturn the plan through the courts or to circumvent the intent of the state imposed integration plan.

The Malverne school board was countered at each turn by pro-civil rights, predominately Black, groups. In September, 1963, pro-integration groups boycotted the Malverne public schools in an attempt to force the school board to end racial imbalance. About 250 children attended temporary "Freedom Schools" schools set up in community churches and a Jewish Center.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, with support from State Senator Norman Lent (Republican/East Rockaway) and Assemblyman John E. Kingston (Republican/Westbury) the battle against school integration in Malverne became an issue in the New York State legislature. In February, 1964, Senator Lent proposed a law that would prevent the State Commissioner of Education from busing students to another school "based on race, color, religion, or national origin." Assemblyman Kingston complained that it was not integration, or money that was the issue, "but the philosophy of government the Education Commissioner is trying to impose on us." The bill was eventually defeated in the Democratic controlled State Assembly.⁴¹

When their legal resistance to integration faltered, white parents tried direct action patterned on the civil rights campaign. They tried to enroll their children in their local schools and organized boycotts and picketing in front of schools. During one demonstration, nine women were arrested.⁴² White parents also established their own home schools and private tutoring plans, claiming that they were necessary to protect the "physical and psychological aspects of the children."⁴³ Pro-integration forces

countered these moves with their own demonstrations and boycotts.⁴⁴ They also accused the Taxpayers and Parents Association of sacrificing the needs of the community's children to satisfy their own political agenda. William Moody, a member of the Malverne school board charged the group was teaching confusion and racism to children; "To say, 'I'm for neighborhood schools, but I'm not against integration'--possibly an adult can separate those thoughts, but a child can't."⁴⁵

In May, 1966, opponents of school integration elected a majority to the Malverne school board. The group pledged to establish a "'free choice plan' under which parents would be permitted to choose which of the districts three elementary schools they wished their children to attend."⁴⁶ In September, 1966, the new Malverne school board refused state dollars intended to help the integration process. The board also threatened that parents would "remove their children from the public schools and send them to private schools" if integration efforts were not abandoned.⁴⁷ In response to this resistance, State Education Commissioner Allen blocked the school board's "free choice plan" and sent an advisory panel into the district to "evaluate its education and integration progress."⁴⁸

Finally, in August, 1967, the Malverne School Board and the State Education Department agreed on a new "4-4-4" plan. When the plan was finally implemented for the 1967-1968 school year, students were divided between two kindergarten through 4th grade schools and then assigned to a district-wide middle school and high school.⁴⁹

The battle over school integration in Malverne and in other Long Island communities paralleled the broader struggles being fought in the United States in the 1960's. On February 23, 1966, a Newsday article tried to explain the tensions and apprehension experienced by people in both camps. Both Black and white families were concerned for the future and safety of their children. Both groups felt they were being denied fundamental rights and the ability to live according to the "American way." Their disagreement was over what the American way represents.⁵⁰