

## *Introduction*

It has been about two decades since the *The Other Boston Busing Story* was first published. In researching this book during the late 1990s, I listened to and learned from a multitude of stories, not a mere single story, as the title may imply. Woven together, these varied stories from sixty-five African American men and women across several generations form a multidimensional narrative about the legacy of METCO, one of America's largest and longest-running voluntary interdistrict desegregation programs.

New material in this edition includes an updated first chapter that explores recent scholarship on the potential benefits of racial diversity in public schools. In chapter 7, I survey the vast landscape of school integration activism and practice at local, state, and national levels and review legal and policy contexts. Since this book's publication in 2001, the tireless work of activists and educators, accompanied by the popular media's renewed interest and growing sophistication in the topic of school integration, has renewed interest and action related to school integration across the United States.

The voices of lived desegregation experience, though, still form the core of this book. These are not the desegregation stories you may have already heard about Boston, the ones about violence triggered by a court order designed to remedy the racial discriminatory practices of school officials. Rather, this book centers on stories from graduates of the quieter but no less complex and life-changing voluntary desegregation effort that has played out in Boston's suburbs for more than a half century.

At the height of the civil rights movement, in 1964, a group of African American parents were fed up with institutional neglect, overcrowding, and segregation in their children's schools in the

city of Boston. They quickly conceived of a transfer program that would enable Black students from Boston to attend nearby predominantly white suburban schools. Within months, the parents had formed partnerships with several suburban school board members and their superintendents. The parents named the organization that would operate the program the Metropolitan Council on Educational Opportunity (METCO). Since 1965, with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation, METCO has enabled students of color living in Boston to attend, now mainly via state-funded transportation, suburban schools beyond the city's municipal borders. About thirty-eight hundred students of color from Boston each year attend predominantly white suburban schools through the program.

At the time of my research, in the late 1990s, METCO was a curiosity to civil rights scholars and advocates, who marveled that this little program was still going strong after more than three decades. METCO was intriguing for lots of reasons, not least of all because it had survived the political and legal attacks on desegregation during the 1980s and 1990s that dismantled so many voluntary programs and mandatory plans across the nation. Now, in 2020, METCO is in its fifty-fourth year. METCO and similar programs in Rochester, New York, and Hartford, Connecticut, are the longest-running voluntary programs of their kind in the United States.

In 2019, METCO held its annual meeting at a local foundation in Boston and opened it to the public. The mood was celebratory. Dozens of current and past METCO students, parents, suburban educators, community supporters, local press, and state legislators hugged each other, mingled over appetizers, and caught up. Speakers testified to the program's positive effect on their lives, their classrooms, their children, and their own consciousness.

Some two decades after *The Other Boston Busing Story's* initial publication, I, too, am still invited to testify about METCO. I speak mostly to suburban educators about the program's civil

rights origins, its history of struggle and growth. I talk about the ways that METCO graduates' and current students' experiences should inform antiracist practice in predominantly white suburban schools. At national conferences and at policy briefings, moderators, audience members, and newspaper and magazine reporters often ask me to explain how METCO endured over so many years. This question is important because it helps crystallize METCO's strengths, its ongoing challenges, and its limitations.

The most obvious reason METCO endures is simply that the experience typically results in tangible short- and long-term benefits for the students of color who participate in it. That's an incredibly encouraging and fairly straightforward story.

Another reason METCO has survived is that the program's students, parents, and alums have worked tirelessly over decades to educate suburban residents and local and state elected officials about the program's history and its benefits, both for students of color from Boston and for students in suburban communities whose demographic uniformity still does not come close to approximating the multiracial composition of the metropolitan region. As a result, METCO now enjoys an ever-growing popularity, vocal political support, and deep respect among suburban educators and their elected leaders, in addition to the backing of many parents and advocates from Boston. Over the years I've continued to talk with METCO graduates, educators, and METCO directors who tell the sorts of positive stories recounted at METCO's annual meeting and in the interviews I conducted for this book. These are stories about opportunities enhanced, about true and lasting friendships across the race line, and about stereotypes debunked on all sides. Like the narratives about tangible earned benefits, these are happy stories too.

The third reason I think METCO has endured should elicit not happiness but requires serious reflection. METCO has survived, in part, I think, because it operates on terms that white subur-

banites can accept. It is relatively small and thus barely alters the demographics of predominantly white suburban school districts. The METCO graduate I spoke with for this book led me to conclude that while this fact may help METCO survive, a status quo default tends to exact considerable costs for students of color. As I found twenty years ago, METCO's African American students adapt and accommodate to the culture of their schools. They learn to survive intact within them and, from their perspectives, develop healthy racial identities over time. But, throughout this process, the students often confront implicit and overt racism, low expectations about their intellectual potential, and feelings of isolation and invisibility. In the meantime, for suburban whites, the process of adjusting, adapting, or empathizing — much less working to shift culture, change practices, and challenge individual prejudices — remains wholly optional.

METCO is attempting something few policies or programs ever even try as it aspires to redress vast structural inequality, widen educational opportunities, and shrink the engineered distance between places and races. That is an enormous responsibility. But as METCO enables African American students to break in, its relatively small size, coupled with normalized, dominant white suburban culture, still lets suburban whites off the hook. These circumstances give rise to a power imbalance that, if not intentionally reversed, will forever limit METCO from reaching its full potential as a counterforce to segregation, racism, and inequality. Twenty years ago, in the conclusion to the first edition of this book, I wrote quite clearly about this conundrum. Each time I returned to the book to prepare for a talk or a media interview, I have regretted that this particular observation wasn't right up front. So, finally, here it is, where I think it belongs.

Perhaps a combination of white gaze and run-of-the-mill naïveté fed my assumption two decades ago that future METCO participants would likely have educational experiences that were less fraught than what METCO participants described to

me. I imagined that racism would surely diminish, that cultural awareness and responsiveness and intentional antiracist practice would emerge among suburban educators, students, and parents. This is beginning to happen in some districts. I have been encouraged by several suburban educators I've met in recent years who are deeply committed to realizing this kind of transformation in their schools. Over these two decades, though, I have also had countless conversations with METCO alums, current students, parents of METCO students, and METCO directors who repeat with eerie similarity stories of exclusion, hurtful cultural misunderstandings, stereotyping, lack of racial diversity among faculty, and paltry representation of people of color in the curriculum at suburban schools participating in METCO.

METCO's executive director, Milly Arbaje-Thomas, and her staff take these challenges seriously. After Arbaje-Thomas's appointment in 2018, the METCO administrative staff worked to introduce a slate of new workshops for suburban educators on such issues as implicit bias and restorative justice. The organization last year also hosted a new annual "Living the Legacy Conference" that brings together METCO supporters, educators, and a range of experts and practitioners to explore ways to remedy racial inequality in classrooms, systems, and structures. METCO staff members, based in Boston's historically Black Roxbury neighborhood, also partner with suburban school district leaders to develop immediate and longer-term responses to racist incidents. I hope that this new edition might help engender support for those efforts that aspire to make METCO work better for everyone, and in particular for the students of color who travel to suburban schools each day.

METCO's founders initially imagined that their program would be short-lived, lasting only until racial segregation was remedied in Boston's schools and fair housing produced more racially diverse suburbs. More than a half century later, though, Boston remains one of the most racially segregated metropolitan

areas in the nation and sits consistently among a set of so-termed “hypersegregated” regions for areas with large shares of African Americans. Levels of segregation for Latinos in the region also consistently rank moderate to high. This segregation correlates with neighborhood poverty levels, which is a strong indicator of health, economic, and educational outcomes. Specifically, only 3 percent of Greater Boston’s white households live in high-poverty areas. But 28 percent of Black and 26 percent of Hispanic households live in such neighborhoods. The racial disparities are even larger when controlling for income. Among households with incomes at or below the poverty rate, just 10 percent of white households, but 46 percent of Black and 47 percent of Hispanic households live in high-poverty areas.

It is not merely the persistence of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic segregation and its harms that justifies METCO and more efforts like it. Over two decades, the research base on the long-term benefits of racial and ethnic diversity in K–12 schools has grown exponentially. Perhaps with the exception of high-quality pre-kindergarten, there is no educational reform effort with as long and as strong a research base to support it. And even though school segregation levels are high across the United States, polls suggest that majorities of people from all racial backgrounds value diverse schools. Among African American parents, 72 percent said a diverse student body is “extremely/very important,” and 18 percent said diverse schools were “somewhat important.” In a 2017 poll by Phi Delta Kappan International, for example, 70 percent of parents said diverse schools are “important,” with 55 percent of those parents feeling that diverse schools are “extremely important.” More than half of parents surveyed said they believe racial diversity improves the learning environment. For most parents, though, “diversity” also competes with other priorities, such as having their children attend school close to their home (Phi Delta Kappan 2017).

In spite of this robust research base and seeming public sup-

port, it is rare for even the most progressive government leaders to talk about segregation, much less propose policies to combat it. But as I explore in chapter 7, new efforts to create and sustain integrated schools have taken root in New York City, Denver, Los Angeles, and several other communities. Activism and organizing around the cause of school integration are far more robust than they were when this book first came out in 2001. And it is usually young people, educators, and parents who are leading the way.

I remain eternally grateful to the people who shared their stories with me more than twenty years ago in their living rooms and kitchens, their offices, and in coffee shops and diners in and around Boston. I know that without you there would be no book. I have taken care, as best I know how, with all the stories METCO participants shared with me. I am also grateful for critical friends who have questioned whether I, as a white woman, then enrolled in a prestigious university, had any business gathering stories from African Americans for the purpose of research. I take this point of view seriously and appreciate the growing movement that encourages researchers to acknowledge the implications of their own power and position in relationship to the communities and individuals they wish to understand.

That being said, I do not believe that my race invalidates my data or findings. Recent research provides insight into concerns around the impact of race, social position, trauma, and gender in qualitative research (Angrosino 2005; Dwyer and Buckle 2009). The nature of the literature is best crystallized, it seems to me, by Laura Serrant-Green (2002), who states, “There appear to be as many arguments for outsider research as against, with the same issues able to be raised in support of outsider research, as against it.”

In my case, I think racial difference created challenges, had drawbacks and benefits. I chose to emphasize with nearly all the interviewees that they should not hold back their opinions on

any topic for fear that I might be offended. Some weeks after my interviews, I did ask just about less than a quarter of my interviewees what effect, if any, they thought my race might have had on their responses to my questions. Their answers were instructive. Generally, the participants said that if I had been Black, they might have opened up more quickly and, many said, talked in a different style, with different inflection, which one respondent described as “more casual,” or as another said, “more real . . . the way I talk around other Blacks.” A few said they might indeed have spent more time complaining about past interactions with white teachers. Conversely, several respondents told me that had I been Black, they would have been less forthcoming about conflicts rooted in adaptation to white environments. This study is about African American women and men who have spent much of their lives crossing the race line. White people are required and expected to cross that line much less frequently, if ever. I wanted to cross that line myself. This research process served to remind me that the very nature of good qualitative research requires deep listening, empathy, and the ability to reflect on the ways that one’s own social position and biases might affect how one makes sense of what one hears.

After twenty or so years, I think I also have a clearer sense of how my own form of isolation led me to this work. When I was about ten years old and living in a very white suburb, I sat on a couch with my friends and watched TV footage of what news anchors dubbed the “Boston busing crisis.” I saw white mothers and fathers spew racial epithets. They hurled rocks at yellow buses carrying Black children. I see now that this was perhaps my first realization of hate in this world.

Some weeks later, in school, I offered what I thought to be a clever idea. Why don’t we all share our schools? I pointed out cheerily: “We are so close to Boston!” I explained that we could all take trains back and forth, just like my dad, just like lots of dads in our town did every morning and evening. It seemed



fairer, but also more appealing than the current arrangement in which I lived in terror of my unkind school principal. The teacher considered me intently. I remember her two slow blinks, because it was the same manner in which my cat regarded me. A boy shouted toward me, “*You are crazy. None of us are going to school in Boston.*” Laughter. Everyone moved on. But I felt stuck.

At some point later in my public school career, a teacher passed out a list of vocabulary words. We were to each read one word and its definition aloud. I pronounced my word incorrectly.

“Sovereign,” the teacher announced, correcting my botched effort. According to Webster’s dictionary, sovereign means “possessing supreme or ultimate power.” That word seemed to sum things up. My town was sovereign. We the white suburban people were sovereign. No one could make us do anything. I didn’t know then about the ways that racism created the suburbs. I didn’t know about redlining and highway construction or about racial discrimination in housing and in mortgage lending and insurance, or about exclusionary zoning in the suburbs or about the state’s enforcement of school district borders that kept segregation in place. All I knew was that when the image of white adults hurling rocks at Black children replayed over and over and over in my little-girl’s mind’s eye, I got a terrible stomachache.

I don’t believe it a coincidence that as a grown-up, I’d write a book about the only government effort in my beloved home state that intentionally reduces the space between urban and suburban, between white children and children of color. At its best, METCO is a powerful antidote to the municipal and school district borders that maintain the separate and unequal schools and reinforce racism and white privilege by isolating us from each other. METCO is not perfect. Until racism is eradicated in our society, it will never be perfect. It shouldn’t be surprising that the white supremacy baked into our society infects and threatens this effort. For METCO’s supporters, acknowledging and remedy-

ing this problem is the crucial, ongoing work in the days, years, and decades to come.

In 2020, the FBI reported a more than 17 percent rise in hate crimes across the United States. This is the third consecutive year those numbers have increased. In 2019, the US Commission on Civil Rights reported that the largest share of post-2016 election hate incidents were in K-12 schools and that the majority of these incidents involved racial or ethnic discrimination. This reality should make the case for efforts that have the potential to disrupt the prejudice and fear that lead to hate. We all have choices to make about how to think and act in this era of deep division. Twenty years ago, the METCO participants I listened to and learned from taught me a lot about how to best do that. For the many lessons they offer all of us, I dedicate this new edition to them and to two African Americans community leaders, Ms. Ruth Batson, who died in 2003, and Ms. Ellen Jackson, who died in 2005. Batson and Jackson, along with several African American parents, founded METCO more than a half century ago. Batson also served as METCO's first executive director. Their contributions are incalculable. I am so fortunate to have benefited from their wit and wisdom as I researched and wrote this book.

*Susan Eaton*  
*Boston, 2020*