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# “With All Deliberate Speed”: Nashville and the First Instance of School Busing After Brown v. Board

## Why Nashville’s Schools Are Integrated in Law but Segregated in Practice



William Spivey Follow 9 min read · 3 days ago

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working for an Upward Bound program and playing summer league basketball, which was permissible for college athletes at the time. I was paying little attention to school integration in Nashville when I arrived, almost twenty years after the first Brown v. Board decision. I did pick up a little through osmosis. Many of the students in the Upward Bound program on the Fisk campus came from what had long been Nashville's only Black high school. I also knew a couple of varsity basketball players from Pearl (the twins) who managed the few blocks between Fisk and Pearl to join in pick-up games with college players.

When the Supreme Court handed down Brown v. Board of Education in May 1954, the ruling was seismic but strangely quiet. There were no marching orders, timelines, or enforcement mechanism. A year later, a follow-up directive in Brown II required districts to desegregate "with all deliberate speed," a phrase that would become both a shield and a loophole.

Across the South, school boards read the decision not as a command but as a suggestion. Legislatures treated it as an affront. White parents treated it as a threat. And federal judges, suddenly responsible for dismantling a century of racial hierarchy, began looking for the first district willing to take even a symbolic step toward compliance. That district was Nashville, Tennessee.

In 1957, Nashville became the first city in the United States to implement court-ordered school busing as a direct response to Brown. It was not the kind of mass reassignment that would later define Charlotte, Louisville, or Boston. But it was the first time a federal judge said plainly: If neighborhood lines are drawn to preserve segregation, then buses will redraw them.

This is the story of how that happened — the school board meetings, the legislative maneuvering, the public outrage, and the quiet courage of the Black families whose children stepped onto those buses.

## I. The School Board Meets "Deliberate Speed"

Nashville's school board was not composed of radicals. It was composed of men who believed they were being forced into a fight they did not choose. In the summer of 1955, after Brown II, the board convened a series of meetings to determine what "deliberate speed" meant in practice.

The minutes from those meetings read like a slow-motion negotiation with inevitability. Board members acknowledged the ruling. They acknowledged the need for a plan. But they also acknowledged — sometimes openly — the political danger of moving too quickly.

One member warned that "any sudden change would provoke unrest." Another insisted that "the integrity of neighborhood schools must be preserved." A third suggested that "the colored schools are functioning adequately," a phrase that revealed more than he intended.

Still, Nashville was different from other Southern cities. It had a moderate mayor, Ben West, who believed the city's reputation mattered. It had a business community that feared national embarrassment. And it had a Black middle class — teachers, ministers, postal workers — who had been organizing quietly for decades.

So the board adopted a grade-a-year plan: first grade would desegregate in 1957, second grade in 1958, and so on. It was incremental, cautious, and designed to minimize white backlash. But even this modest plan required something radical: transportation.

Because Nashville's neighborhoods were segregated by design, simply opening enrollment would not produce integration. Black children lived in Black neighborhoods. White children lived in white neighborhoods. Without buses, the plan was symbolic. With buses, it became real.

## II. The Legislature Responds: Resistance in a Suit and Tie

Tennessee's legislature reacted to Nashville's plan with the kind of polite hostility that defined mid-century Southern politics. Unlike Alabama or

Mississippi, where defiance was loud and theatrical, Tennessee preferred procedural resistance.

Lawmakers introduced bills to "protect the rights of local communities." They debated measures to "preserve educational stability." They floated amendments requiring parental consent for any reassignment. None of these bills mentioned race explicitly, but everyone understood the subtext.

One representative warned that "forced transportation will destroy the fabric of our schools." Another argued that "the Supreme Court has exceeded its authority." A third insisted that "the people of Tennessee will not tolerate social experimentation."

Behind closed doors, the conversation was less restrained. Legislators worried that busing would become a precedent. If Nashville complied, other cities might follow. If Nashville resisted, the courts might intervene more aggressively.

In the end, the legislature did not block the plan outright. Doing so would invite a confrontation with the federal courts. Instead, they passed a series of resolutions condemning "judicial overreach" and urging "local discretion." It was resistance by memo — symbolic, but politically useful.

## III. The Public Reacts: Fear, Rumor, and Quiet Resolve

When Nashville announced that first-grade desegregation would begin in fall 1957, the public response split along familiar lines.

### White Parents

White parents packed school board meetings, wrote letters to the editor, and organized neighborhood petitions. Their objections were framed as concerns about safety, stability, and “tradition,” but the underlying fear was clear: proximity.

Some insisted that their children would be “uncomfortable.” Others warned that “standards would decline.” A few said openly that they did not want their children “mixing.” In certain neighborhoods, rumors spread that buses would bring “crowds” of Black children into white schools — a claim that was mathematically impossible, given the small number of students involved.

### Black Parents

Black parents responded differently. Many had lived through decades of underfunded schools, hand-me-down textbooks, and overcrowded classrooms. They saw busing not as a threat but as an opportunity — a chance for their children to access resources long denied.

But they also feared retaliation. Some worried about harassment. Others feared their children would be isolated. A few questioned whether the plan was worth the risk. Still, when the time came, they stepped forward.

## IV. The First Bus Ride

On September 9, 1957, Nashville placed a small number of Black first-graders on buses and sent them to previously all-white schools. The number was modest — fewer than two dozen students — but the symbolism was enormous.

The buses were ordinary. The children were quiet. The drivers were instructed to avoid drawing attention. But the moment was unmistakable:

the first court-ordered busing in the United States after Brown.

The schools involved included:

- Hattie Cotton Elementary School
- Fehr Elementary School
- Jones Elementary School
- Bailey Elementary School

These were neighborhood schools in white areas, chosen because they were close enough to Black neighborhoods to minimize travel time but far enough to require transportation.

At Hattie Cotton, the arrival of one Black first-grader triggered a violent response. That night, segregationists bombed the school, blowing out windows and destroying classrooms. The child had done nothing more than walk into a building.

The bombing shocked the city. Mayor Ben West condemned it. The school board condemned it. Even some white parents who opposed integration condemned it. But the message was clear: even one Black child in a white school was too much for some. Still, the buses kept running.

## V. Aftermath: Compliance, Backlash, and the Slow March Forward

In the weeks that followed, Nashville became a test case for the nation. Federal judges watched closely. Civil rights organizations monitored the situation. Other school boards took notes.

### White Resistance

White resistance continued, but it was not as explosive as in later cities. Nashville's moderate political culture prevented the kind of mass boycotts seen in New Orleans or the violent mobs seen in Little Rock.

Still, some white parents withdrew their children. Others pressured the board to slow the plan. A few neighborhoods organized informal car-pools to avoid buses entirely.

### Black Persistence

Black families remained committed. They attended PTA meetings. They documented incidents. They pushed the board to expand the plan beyond first grade. Their quiet persistence became the backbone of Nashville's compliance.

### The Courts

Judge William E. Miller, who oversaw the case, made it clear that Nashville's plan must continue. He rejected attempts to delay. He rejected attempts to modify. He insisted that "deliberate speed" meant progress, not paralysis.

## VI. Legacy: The First Bus Ride and the Long Road Ahead

I never got the impression during my time in Nashville that the city was a leader in the civil rights movement. I knew nothing about Nashville's history regarding school integration. I was aware of the Nashville lunch-counter demonstrations led by Fiskite Diane Nash that took place from February 13 to May 10, 1960. This period marks the coordinated sit-ins that ultimately made Nashville the first major Southern city to desegregate its downtown lunch counters.

In May 1961, Diane Nash helped coordinate the continuation of the Freedom Rides after the original CORE riders were attacked in Alabama. She organized Nashville's "nonviolent army" to continue the rides from Birmingham to Jackson.

Nashville's 1957 busing plan did not end segregation. It did not transform the city overnight. It did not produce the kind of sweeping integration that civil rights leaders hoped for. But it did something important: it established a precedent.

It proved that courts could order transportation. It proved that school boards could comply. It proved that Black families would participate. And it proved that even small steps could provoke enormous backlash.

In the decades that followed, busing became one of the most contentious issues in American education. Charlotte's Swann decision in 1971 expanded it. Boston's crisis in 1974 dramatized it. Louisville's 1975 plan normalized it. But Nashville was first.

Because busing rolled out unevenly across the country, the "last" cities were generally those that resisted until the late 1970s.

- Seattle (1978) — Seattle became the first major U.S. city to voluntarily undertake district-wide busing, beginning September 29, 1978, after years of limited middle-school busing and threats of federal intervention.
- This makes Seattle one of the latest large cities to begin full-scale desegregation busing. Before giving a big thumbs up to Seattle, you'll later hear they were the first to end race-based busing.

Other cities began busing earlier (Boston 1974, Charlotte 1971, Norfolk 1970s), so Seattle stands out as the last major adopter documented in the search results.

Two cities appear clearly in the record as early dismantlers:

- Norfolk, Virginia (1986) — Norfolk was the first city in the country to end busing in grades K–5, ending elementary school busing in 1986.
- Middle school busing ended in 2001; high school busing was debated in 2003.
- Seattle, Washington (1996–1999) — Seattle voted to end mandatory elementary busing in 1996, and dismantled the remaining race-based busing for middle and high schools by 1999–2000.
- This made Seattle one of the earliest major cities to end race-based busing fully.

Since Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle (2007), school districts cannot assign students to schools based on race, even for integration purposes. Districts may pursue integration, but only through race-neutral means (e.g., socioeconomic status, neighborhood boundaries, magnet programs). This ruling effectively ended the last remaining race-based assignment systems in the U.S., including Seattle's.

Pearl High School (the historically Black high school in Nashville) closed in 1983 when it merged with Cohn High School to form Pearl-Cohn Comprehensive High School. The original 1937 Pearl High building was later converted into Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Magnet at Pearl High School (MLK Magnet), which opened in 1986. MLK Magnet is still open today, serving grades 8–12 (transitioning to 9–12 by 2028).

Nashville's 1957 busing plan marked the nation's first attempt to translate Brown v. Board from principle into practice. It was narrow, cautious, and deliberately incremental — but it was a beginning. The city did what the Supreme Court asked: it moved "with all deliberate speed," even when that speed was glacial. Whether Nashville ultimately succeeded in integrating its schools is a more complicated question.

For a time, the answer looked like yes. Through the 1970s and 1980s, court-ordered busing expanded beyond the first-grade pilot, producing measurable gains in racial balance, access to resources, and cross-neighborhood enrollment. Pearl High's transformation into a magnet program, and later into MLK Magnet, reflected a broader effort to preserve Black educational heritage while opening academic opportunity.It must be said: when Pearl High closed in 1983, and the building reopened in 1986 as Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet School, many alumni felt that a core part of Nashville's Black educational heritage had been erased.

Like most American cities, Nashville's progress proved fragile. When federal courts lifted desegregation orders in the 1990s, the city — no longer under judicial supervision — began drifting back toward patterns shaped by housing, income, and municipal boundaries. Today, Nashville's schools are more racially and economically stratified than they were at the height of court-ordered integration. Not because buses stopped running, but because the underlying geography of segregation never changed.

So did Nashville meet its objectives? It met the objectives the courts set: compliance, transportation, and incremental desegregation. It did not meet the objectives Brown implied — equal educational opportunity sustained across generations.

Nashville did not finish the work. But it began it. And sometimes, in the long arc of American education, the first step is the one that changes the direction of the road.

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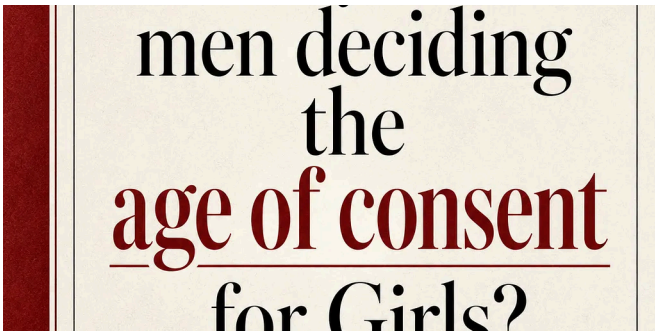


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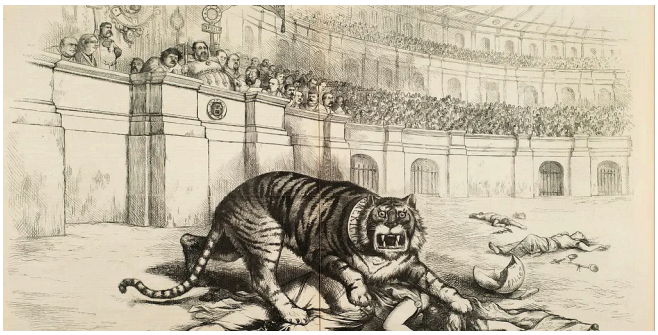
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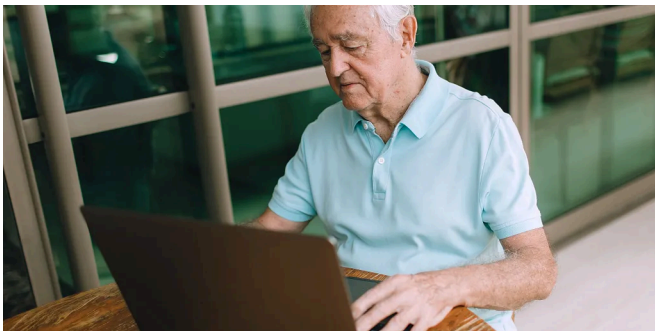



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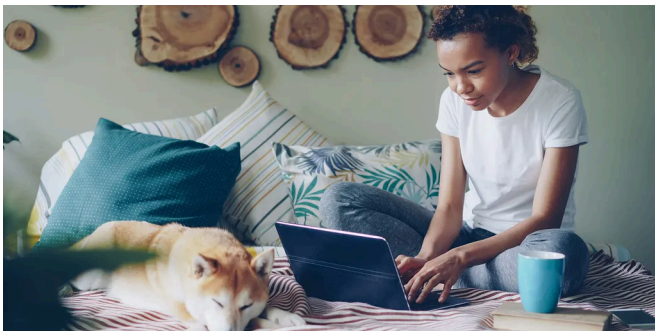
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