

Williams herself became a political activist partly to protect her children from busing. A single mother who raised four children, Williams struggled to put her children through a nearby private school. But its classes ended in eighth grade, forcing Williams's children into the public schools. At one point Williams wanted her daughter to attend Riverside High, but the school system planned to bus her daughter to a school Williams thought inferior. She appealed the decision, and her appeal was denied. Williams then strode down the hall to the superintendent's office. She found the office empty. Spotting a legal pad on the desk, she wrote, "My name is Polly Williams. I live at 1437 Burleigh Street. I will not send my child to the school you've assigned. You may come and arrest me."

"Then," Williams recalls, holding her wrists together as if ready for handcuffs, "I went home to wait." Three hours passed, and the phone rang. Williams's daughter sat watching at the kitchen table as her mother answered. The conversation was short and, uncharacteristically, Williams did most of the listening. Hanging up, she turned to her daughter. "It was the superintendent's office. You start at Riverside on Monday."

Wisconsin's landmark private school voucher law has its origins in Williams's own experience. She has institutionalized the right she won for herself a dozen years before. "I came up with choice outside of the public school system," she told the *New York Times*, "because I couldn't get choice within it."

Busing in Milwaukee became slightly less onerous in 1991, when Superintendent Howard Fuller divided the city into five zones and allowed elementary school parents to choose the zone to which their children could be bused. The policy, still in force, ensures that preteen children from the same neighborhood school "attendance area" will be bused to "only" 25 or 30 other schools, instead of 100. Secondary school students are still bused anywhere in the city.

For African-American parents seeking to keep their children close to home, busing has meant the end of the neighborhood public school. In Milwaukee, Polly Williams observes, busing ensured that "the only neighborhood schools that were left were private schools."



BUSING FAILS IN PITTSBURGH

Weighing her options, Melissa considers everything from moving out of the city, to home schooling, to lying about her address. She wants to leave the city for nearby suburbs, but can't afford it. Her husband is a truck driver, and she's a convenience store clerk three nights a week. "I thought about using my sister-in-law's address outside the city like my neighbor does, but I'm too honest. I'd do home-schooling if I was educated enough. Five of my girlfriends do."

"It was in sixth grade," she says, "that 10-year-old Scott began being bused from Carmalt to Northside and lost three hours out of his day and began to live in fear for his life." Within three weeks Scott witnessed his first gunshots. The following week Melissa and Scott had their first argument about gang colors: "I'd ironed a red outfit for him the night before, matching sweat pants and a sweater. 'I can't wear that; it's gang colors,' Scott said. 'Do you want me to be killed?' I ironed him a plaid shirt." Melissa adds that "this has nothing to do with race. Our Bible study group is one of the most integrated in Pittsburgh. It's about weapons and the feeling that I'm losing control over my son's safety."

Many Pittsburghers who can afford it have left the city, while others enroll their children in private schools. Large numbers of students scheduled for busing to the middle schools have enrolled in private schools. Last year the Pittsburgh school district lost 439 students, on top of 278 the year before.

By paying tutors \$10 an hour, the estimated \$10 million of this year's busing budget allocated to racial balancing would pay for a million hours of individualized instruc-

tion to students, while also providing supplementary income to student tutors or teachers. "Wouldn't tutoring increase a disadvantaged student's chances for success more than two hours on a bus each day?" asks Melissa's husband.

On July 12, bowing to angry parents, Governor Tom Ridge signed Act 117, known as the Neighborhood Schools Bill. It prohibits the Human Relations Commission from assigning any student to a school other than the one nearest to the student's home, and also prohibits assigning children to schools on the basis of race, religion, color, sex, ancestry, or national origin.

But a spokesman for the Pittsburgh Board of Education says the act "may have no effect in Pittsburgh." The act is not retroactive, she explains, and the Board is still under a court order to "maintain diversity. Nothing in the act prevents a school district from voluntarily continuing an integration plan." Fearful that the School Board may not take action in accord with Act 117 Michael Romanello, editor of the *Pittsburgh Observer*, is calling for a tax strike "to force the issue."

Meanwhile, the buses keep rolling and families like Melissa's are still getting steamrolled. "It seems like the middle class can't get ahead any more," says Melissa. "Everything's for the rich or the poor. If I had the money, I'd be gone out of this city."

"If we stop busing, I think we can save the city," says Pittsburgh City Councilman Dan Onorato. "If we do nothing and keep the same situation, in the next 20 years the city will be in financial ruin."

—Ralph Reiland teaches at Robert Morris College in Pittsburgh.

family melted down in the classroom

by
**Karl
Zinsmeister**

American children come to school better prepared to learn than in times past—in most ways. The percentage of high school students with a mother who didn't graduate from high school herself has fallen from over 80 in 1940 to 20 today. The number of students from large, crowded families (a condition that correlates with lower academic achievement) has tumbled. And average kids are much better nourished, healthier, and materially better off than in earlier years.

But even as these traditional stumbling blocks to school success were disappearing, one other risk factor was taking off, and it wiped out the multiple gains that should have left 1990s students in much better shape than their predecessors. This big new negative was the rise of the single-parent household. Because of the breakdown of marriage, typical American children today receive less care and oversight from their parents. As a result, the raw material flowing into our classrooms is much rawer than it once was.

"The family revolution is the greatest single cause of the decline in student achievement during the last 20 years," says Samuel Sava, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. "It's not better teachers, texts, or curricula that our children need most," he says. "It's better childhoods."

When he was director of the NAACP, Benjamin Hooks made the same case with particular reference to minority students:

We can talk all we want about school integration; we can file suits to have more black role models in the classrooms and in administrative positions.... But if the child returns home to a family devoid of the basic tenets necessary for his discipline, growth, and development, the integrated school environment must fail.

As far back as the late 1960s, University of Chicago sociologist James Coleman published groundbreaking studies demonstrating the importance of family patterns to school achievement. In the early 1970s, sociologist Christopher Jencks and some colleagues wrote a watershed book demonstrating that family stability and home conditions are far more important to academic success than the way a school is structured. In the early 1980s, Professor Harold Stevenson found that American schoolchildren lagged behind their Asian counterparts intellectually from as early as the first grade—when only a weaker home environment, and not schools, could be blamed.

Early 1990s research papers on Indochinese "boat people" who had arrived in the U.S. after years of physical and emotional trauma, possessing very little English, education, or money, "point overwhelmingly to the pivotal role of the family in children's academic success." The children studied had been in this country on average less than four years and were all attending relatively weak schools in low-income urban areas. Nonetheless, these youngsters excelled academically—not just a few whiz kids, but the vast majority. And the reason,

