

North Division: Educational Reform at Milwaukee's Most Prominent High School

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History 681

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April 25, 2021

The shores of Lake Michigan invite tourists, residents, and passersby to encounter several of Milwaukee's crown jewels. The Summerfest Grounds, home to the nation's largest outdoor music festival; the Art Museum, renowned for its architecture; and the downtown city center, housing the city's business, sports, and recreation hubs, dot the lakefront and remind the world of Milwaukee's many sources of civic pride. Often overlooked, however, are the neighborhoods just inland from this impressive collection of Milwaukee's attractions. The North Side neighborhood, home to the majority of Milwaukee's Black population, is often forgotten and passed by. Intense redlining, segregated schooling, and other funding and policy inequities have relegated much of Milwaukee's Black population to this underserved neighborhood, which has experienced high rates of poverty, unemployment, and incarceration. The North Side is sadly affected heavily by racialized incarceration, unfair and inordinately high suspension rates for Black students, and the racist school-to-prison pipeline. In fact, it ranks as one of the worst areas in the entire county in these metrics.<sup>1</sup>

Of all these problems, one of the biggest and most obvious is segregated and underfunded schools. Because segregated schooling often results from the "neighborhood school" model, it is arguably caused by other racist policies such as redlining, real estate "blockbusting" (a practice essentially designed to create white flight), and segregated housing in general.<sup>2</sup> Although inextricably entwined with other issues of race and class, including political underrepresentation

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<sup>1</sup> Kenya Downs, "Why is Milwaukee So Bad For Black People?" NPR Code Switch, March 5, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/03/05/390723644/why-is-milwaukee-so-bad-for-black-people>

<sup>2</sup> Jessie Paulson, Meghan Wierschke, and Gabe Jun Ha Kim, "Milwaukee's History of Segregation and Development: A Biography of Four Neighborhoods." MINDS@UW, UW Geography Undergraduate Colloquium (2016): 6, 7; Barbara Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 111-112.

and segregated housing, education has the unique status as one of Milwaukee's most contested and enduring issues.

Educational reforms in Milwaukee have repeatedly focused on the city's Black community and particularly on Black-majority schools. These reforms have been most frequent and most dramatic at one school in particular: North Division High School. A longstanding pillar of Milwaukee's Black community, North Division went through a dramatic racial and economic transition due to increased Black migration to the neighborhood and the resulting white flight to the suburbs during the late 1950s and early 1960s. North Division faced overcrowding, outdated facilities, and dramatic segregation, and it was at the center of integration debates in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, students, faculty, and community members debated community control, integration, and culturally-based learning, as well as logistical concerns over the construction of a new building and what type of school would occupy that facility. In the 1980s, more debates ensued, particularly during the "Save North Division" movement, which favored keeping North Division as a neighborhood school and thus a cultural hub for the Black community. Debates continued during the push by North Division graduate and social activist Howard Fuller to create an independent Black school district centered around North Division in the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup> More debates and changes were to come in the 1990 and 2000s. The school was controversially converted into three small charter schools in 2004, only to be reopened as a unitary "North Division High School" again in 2009–2010.<sup>4</sup> Through the present day, it has continued to be a key site of discussions about Black autonomy, small school implementation, and other educational reforms.

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<sup>3</sup> Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland*, 134-137.

<sup>4</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, "North Division High School to make Comeback in 2010," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), March 26, 2009.

Because of the number and scale of its reforms, North Division serves as a crucial vehicle to understanding educational inequality and reform in Milwaukee's predominantly Black schools. This case study will give a historical analysis of North Division's many changes, from the integration struggle of the 1960s and 1970s to the modern-day reopening of North Division in the small high school model.<sup>5</sup> The paper will argue that the most critical component of reform at North Division has been the involvement of local activists, particularly Black women and girls. In multiple different eras at North, the community continually stepped up to protest inequity and demand a greater voice in their school's affairs. Even when governing structures failed to grant them real power, community activism never ceased. These oft-overlooked developments have had a huge impact on creating change at North Division and the surrounding community. This paper will also note that due to North Division's size and racial composition, it was always going to be a primary candidate for reform, but that influences other than hard numbers had the largest impact on its many reformulations.<sup>6</sup> Several factors, including local and national trends in integration, school performance, and perceived educational innovation, brought about these changes. In addition to well-intentioned reforms, more negative factors such as budget cuts, impatience, and uninformed policy decisions also took their toll on North Division, both creating and destroying reform efforts. Even with strong local and national

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<sup>5</sup> In this paper, the author uses "integration" and "desegregation" interchangeably. It should be noted that during the debates, Black and white Milwaukeeans alike tended to use the term "integration," but the term "desegregation" may be more useful today because it highlights the *intentional* segregative practices that the School Board and other bodies in the city employed.

<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the 99% Black student population operating at near-overflow capacity made the school a key target for integration reform. It also meant that it would be difficult to meet reform quotas on racial balance, because so many white students would have to join the school—or a large number of Black students would have to leave—to meet the necessary requirements. Additionally, the current North Division building is so massive that it has been a prime site for small school reform. This thesis will go on to discuss both of these developments in greater detail.

influences present, though, it has been the grassroots activists who have played the most significant role in achieving change at North Division. In the process, and with historical analysis to interpret decisions, these developments help paint a clear picture of the difficulties Black education has been forced to contend with in an educational context that disproportionately favors wealthier, whiter, and more suburban schools. Much can and should be learned from the North Division experience, which can hopefully serve as both a lesson and a beacon of hope for locally-controlled reform in the future.

### **Historiographical contributions**

This paper builds upon a larger, more far-reaching historiography. There is a rich and valuable body of literature about educational reform in Milwaukee. While earlier works focus on the desegregation/integration, or Civil Rights Movement, era of the 1960s and 1970s, this thesis reaches past the 1960s in order to analyze similar obstacles and practices from different, more recent reforms. In doing so, it seeks to emulate the approaches of historians Jack Dougherty and Patrick D. Jones, who answer questions about education reform through the lens of grassroots organization. Like these scholars, my work focuses on multiple, intersectional issues that grassroots activists faced and how their tactics and goals evolved. Dougherty's *More Than One Struggle* is chronologically the first in this historiography to address this era, and Jones' *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* builds on this scholarship just four years later. Dougherty argues that Black activists faced multiple, often intertwined, challenges in their civil rights protests, and Jones argues that Black activists in Milwaukee evolved and adapted to ongoing circumstances in open housing protests.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Patrick D. Jones,

Like this thesis, the more recent historiography of education reform in Milwaukee touches on the Civil Rights Movement while focusing more attention on recent developments. While I hope to focus on recent educational history, as authors Barbara Miner and James K. Nelsen have, my ultimate goal and arguments are shaped by discussion of grassroots activism, as Dougherty and Jones have done. Miner's *Lessons from the Heartland* and Nelsen's *Educating Milwaukee*, which followed in quick succession, give broader educational histories of Milwaukee.<sup>8</sup> Their foci are on post-1980s reform, most notably the neoliberal policy changes that occurred in the 2000s and early 2010s. These authors discuss more recent histories, arguing that conservative funding cuts and school realignments (charters, vouchers) have played the most prominent role in limiting public education, but they focus more on policy-oriented analyses than on grassroots activism.

### **Methodology and sourcework**

In writing this case study, I used a variety of sources on North Division, the City of Milwaukee, and educational and social trends nationwide. The bulk of my source work is primary documents from historical collections at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Milwaukee County Historical Society, and Milwaukee Public Library system. I give special thanks to Marcia P. Coggs, Vel Phillips, and Lloyd Barbee for their meticulously-preserved collections at the Wisconsin Historical Society. The thoroughness of these three Milwaukee icons amazes me to this day. From these collections, I was able to use hundreds of records on North Division and the

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*The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009)

<sup>8</sup> James K. Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015) and Barbara Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*.

City of Milwaukee, including integration plans, communications with constituents and city leaders, minutes from town hall debates, newspaper clippings, personal notes, bill proposals, and numerous other forms of primary documents. Additionally, I accessed integration plans and community feedback from the Milwaukee County Historical Society's archives. For more recent events, I used primary and secondary sources from many different places, including newspapers, video interviews, books on education in Milwaukee, books on racism and education nationwide, transcripts of oral interviews, and assorted academic articles and projects.

My work in this paper approaches educational reform and history from a different angle, one that concentrates on an individual site of contestation (North Division High School). Most importantly, my work addresses the temporal gap in the historiography of Milwaukee's education reform. The latest publications were published too long ago to explore the majority of the 2010s, and much of my paper is devoted to extending the focus on activism during the time of more recent reforms. This is significant not only for analyzing the current effects of older policies, but also for examining and positing theory on more recent policy changes.

My source work is based on this historiography, but more critically on primary source evaluation. I have studied the debates over integration through college student Carol Birmingham's academic project, "A Chronology of the Integration of the Milwaukee Public Schools 1963–1976 with Emphasis on the Course of the De Facto Segregation Suit and Addendum." Her work has given me insight into the planning stages of the integration debate. Additionally, reports such as urban education doctorate student Theodore V. Montgomery Jr.'s "School Desegregation Planning, Milwaukee 1976 Chronology, Plans, and Participants" and Milwaukee Urban Observatory writer Pamela J. Sampson's "Options – School Desegregation" have provided additional context about the different players in the debate and their roles in

arguments. My work with the Lloyd Barbee, Vel Phillips, and Marcia P. Coggs papers centers on the grassroots activism local residents displayed, particularly Black women. These are my most crucial sources in the introductory part of my paper, in which I introduce the context of the desegregation period. They show the resolve and commitment of North Division community members in fighting for equitable, community-friendly education. I also explore the *Milwaukee Star* newspaper, a Black-owned and published paper from the 1960s, to show the commitment of Black communities to the desegregation cause and to educational improvement more generally. Finally, I use recent sources from reporters such as Emily Files, Meghan Dwyer, and John Parnon to identify and interpret local struggles in education reform. This more recent source base also includes articles from the *Journal Sentinel* online archives and the Milwaukee Public Library. I have identified sources in these databases that focus on the 1980s “Save North Division” movement, as well as the recent closure of North Division and the accompanying community activism. There are also building plans, accounts from activists, and oral interviews that will help give another dimension to my work.

### **The school integration period, 1964–1979**

The first section of this thesis will focus on the legal, political, and social battles for integrated schooling in Milwaukee. Aspirations for educational improvement, including integrated student and faculty bodies, existed long before the 1960s. This section, however, will focus on the largest-scale demonstrations and decisions that occurred between 1964 and 1979. North Division, as well as community organizations in its neighborhood, featured prominently in the Milwaukee school integration debates. Before delving into North Division’s role in this campaign, it is important to understand the context of the debates themselves.



Segregated schooling was an open secret in Milwaukee, even after the famous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954 and the Civil Rights legislation of 1964 and 1968. Milwaukee had well-documented legacies of segregation in its public school system. Readers may be shocked to learn that segregation was allowed to function unchanged until much later in the 1970s. Through numerous legally questionable means, including blatant redlining, district zoning, and other racially motivated tactics, both the city and the district were able to facilitate racially segregated schools for more than 25 years *after* the *Brown* decision.<sup>9</sup> The most egregious of these tactics was that of “intact busing,” in which Black students and their teachers from overcrowded schools were “relocated” to white schools for classes. The caveat of this system was that Black students were forced to remain completely segregated from their white counterparts: Black students were sent *back* to their overcrowded schools to eat lunch, after which they were again bused to the white school for classes in isolated classrooms.<sup>10</sup> This system completely prohibited contact between Black and white students, even though this was ridiculously complicated. Intact busing was supposed to be a “temporary” solution for overcrowded schools. In reality, it lasted over 15 years.<sup>11</sup>

The School Board of the Milwaukee Public Schools was adamant that school segregation was accidental, and that their decision-making had nothing to do with it.<sup>12</sup> While the evidence of intentional segregation seems clear, it was still a legally complicated issue. Congress and the

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<sup>9</sup> Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*; Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*; and Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*.

<sup>10</sup> Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*, 94; Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*.

<sup>11</sup> Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City's History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, 64, 73, 256.

Supreme Court frequently gave support to supposedly “accidental” segregation and “colorblind” or “race-neutral” policies well after the Civil Rights Act. The 1973 Supreme Court decision *Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver* was a turning point, setting a precedent that school districts had to prove that they did not employ “segregative intent.”<sup>13</sup> This decision lent support to the *Amos* anti-segregation case in Milwaukee, which will be discussed later in the paper. The Common Council, Milwaukee’s elected legislative and administrative body, was just as steadfast in its own self-defense.<sup>14</sup> Neither was willing to address complaints about segregation. The School Board refused to make any changes to its policies; meanwhile, for five years the Common Council rejected every open housing ordinance by an 18–1 margin. Vel Phillips, the only Black member of the Council, was the sole member to vote for her own proposal.<sup>15</sup> Phillips’ courage and determination cannot be overstated. Even through crushing opposition, she continued to push for open housing, and she was a pioneer in education, politics, and law. While she appears again only briefly in later *education* debates—her primary focus was open housing and local governance—she was truly a legendary figure in Milwaukee, and her contributions deserve to be rightfully recognized. At the time of Phillips’ push for open housing and the greater push for desegregation, the only “changes” to occur were, as author and urban historian James K. Nelsen called them, “stall tactic[s]” made by a school board and superintendent that preferred to focus on other issues.<sup>16</sup> Thus, legal action seemed to be the only logical recourse that remained. After having his pleas fall on deaf ears for years, civil rights activist and politician

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<sup>13</sup> “*Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver, Colorado.*” Oyez. Accessed on December 12, 2020. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1972/71-507>.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, 198.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 176–177.

<sup>16</sup> Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*, 18, 43.

Lloyd Barbee helped file a federal lawsuit in 1965 alleging that MPS policy intentionally and actively promoted segregated schooling.<sup>17</sup> The case was a grueling and frustrating one that lasted for over 14 years, including appeals. An eventual ruling by federal judge John Reynolds in 1976 ruled in favor of Barbee and his complaints in the court case *Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*. After years of fruitless planning and appeals—which went all the way to the Supreme Court—the district finally agreed to change its policies in 1979. This period between 1976 and 1979 is when the integration debates heated up to their highest temperature, with North Division often taking center stage.

North Division High School was a central player in the integration debates both after the 1976 *Amos* ruling and after the 1979 out-of-court settlement finally reached by the School Board.<sup>18</sup> One primary reason for North Division’s frequent appearance in debates was the physical reality of the building. North Division itself was outmoded and even dangerous for students. Age, overcrowding, and a 1976 fire all contributed to the dilapidation of the school building, which all sides of the debate unanimously agreed should be fixed or replaced.<sup>19</sup> The condition of the building was a major concern for John Gronouski, whom Judge Reynolds appointed as a Special Master to the integration process. Gronouski approved the plans for North Division to become a magnet specialty school for the 1978-1979 school year, but only on the

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<sup>17</sup> Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*, 80; Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*, 46–47.

<sup>19</sup> Carol Birmingham, “A Chronology of the Integration of the Milwaukee Public Schools 1963–1976 with Emphasis on the Course of the De Facto Segregation Suit and Addendum,” Milwaukee County Historical Society archival collections, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Nelsen, *Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*, 56, 105.

condition that a new facility be constructed first.<sup>20</sup> He vetoed the original designation because he viewed the “physical plant [as] so bad it would doom the whole idea of magnet schools.”<sup>21</sup> Additionally, according to many of the integration reports, the building was seriously overcrowded.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the school was predominantly populated by Black students was an extra consideration for Superintendent McMurrin and Special Master Gronouski. It was tacitly understood that desegregation would be done in a manner friendly to white students, mostly sending Black students to predominantly white schools; this meant that the number of students who would be removed from North Division was much higher than in other schools, and thus much costlier to relocate as well. The demographics and size of the student body made it one of the more difficult sites for integration. Washington High School, for example, spent \$55,000 to reduce its enrollment, compared to \$82,500 for North Division.<sup>23</sup> Predictably, the relocation of students caused many issues in the North Division community.

The proposed enrollment reduction at North Division caused tensions between the district and Black families in the North Side neighborhoods. It seemed to many as though the school, seen as a pillar of the Black community, was having its sense of “community” taken away.<sup>24</sup> Thus, many community members led the charge to challenge what they perceived as unfair and inequitable reforms. They stumped for the new North Division to remain near its original location and remain a hub for the Black community. The North Division Parent Teacher Student

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<sup>20</sup> Theodore V. Montgomery, “School Desegregation Planning, Milwaukee 1976 Chronology, Plans, and Participants,” Milwaukee County Historical Society Archival Collection, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 502.

<sup>21</sup> Birmingham, “A Chronology of the Integration of the Milwaukee Public Schools 1963–1976 with Emphasis on the Course of the De Facto Segregation Suit and Addendum,” 27, 28, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Montgomery, “School Desegregation Planning, Milwaukee 1976 Chronology, Plans, and Participants.”

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 604.

Organization (PTSO) argued that a new building would “help the black neighborhood around the site economically and provide needed community recreation facilities.”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, many were concerned about the inequity in student relocation. Some parents and students were upset that they would have to leave North Division in the first place. Others, including the PTSO president, wanted “other children to be bussed in” to the school “if North Division children are going to be bussed out.”<sup>26</sup> From a student perspective, the integration plans made the new construction seem painfully ironic. Why, wondered many, was a new building finally constructed in a Black-majority neighborhood if local residents wouldn’t be able to use it?

North Division graduate Greg Lewis highlighted this concern in a May 1979 community forum, saying that the North Division community fought for a new school for years but wouldn’t be able to use it under the integration plans.<sup>27</sup> One white school board member echoed Lewis’s concerns in a separate meeting, asking the Board of School Directors if it were fair to build a new school that many neighborhood children wouldn’t even be able to attend.<sup>28</sup> Countless other North Division students and families shared similar concerns in meetings open to the public. Underlying all these arguments was the notion that there must be “equal sharing of the burden to desegregate” between Black and white students.<sup>29</sup> The Milwaukee Urban League underscored these concerns with a statement specific to busing, one of the most controversial facets of integration efforts. It argued that “there must be equity in the transportation of white and black

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 616.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Typescript of Minutes of the Meeting of the Instruction Committee, 1 May 1979, 34. Box 223, Folder 7, Lloyd Barbee papers, Wisconsin Historical Society archival collection, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>28</sup> Typescript of Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of School Directors, 1 May 1979, 12. Box 223, Folder 7, Lloyd Barbee papers.

<sup>29</sup> Montgomery, “School Desegregation Planning, Milwaukee 1976 Chronology, Plans, and Participants,” 544.

students.”<sup>30</sup> (The busing issue would go on to be a logistical nightmare, far exceeding the original budget allocations and creating a spiderweb of transit routes for students.)<sup>31</sup>

The community presence in these debates is especially noteworthy because it put Black agency at the center of debates. Community participation was not just a way to argue for North Division; it was also a way to highlight the concerns of Milwaukee’s predominantly Black North Side neighborhood. It proved to city power brokers that the oft-overlooked North Side was no passive force. Instead, it showed itself to be a vibrant and deeply committed community ready and willing to fight against structural and systemic racism to create equitable reforms for its schools. Additionally, many Black students and families wanted clearer communication networks with local decision-makers and a greater Black voice in school affairs.<sup>32</sup> To many, it seemed unfair and counterintuitive to have white-majority institutions making decisions for Black students and families. This is another key point of self-determination and community control. While some of these concerns would be addressed through such means as open meetings, interracial committees, and other forums, the same concerns of autonomy and agency would arise again in the 1980s and 1990s. I will discuss both in later sections of this paper.

Within the integration debates, though, there were clear signals from the North Division community: many Black residents, even across generational divisions, supported integration. Ultimately, community leadership, students, and other local voices made it clear that their main goal was to improve the quality of education at North Division. Integration was perfectly

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 598.

<sup>31</sup> Nelsen, “Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools,” 74. Also note that the MPS busing budget for the first year after the desegregation case (1977-78) was \$6.8 million. This was nearly double the year before (\$3.6 million) and nearly *eight times* the budget two years before (\$894,000).

<sup>32</sup> Birmingham, “A Chronology of the Integration of the Milwaukee Public Schools 1963–1976 with Emphasis on the Course of the De Facto Segregation Suit and Addendum,” 30.

acceptable, as long as it furthered this primary goal. Critically, many students present at community meetings echoed these sentiments. The overarching message seemed to be one of strategic acceptance: students were willing to try their best to make integration work because they believed it would ultimately help their own educational experience. North Division students staked their claim for peaceful, productive integration throughout the years of public integration forums. At an earlier meeting of the Finance and Facilities Committee in March 1976, student Dwaine Washington was emphatic in his plea to “get this act together so that integration can mean a positive thing for both the [white] South siders and the blacks.” He went on to argue for “quality education...so that the whole overall picture is enhanced for us all.”<sup>33</sup> Another student, Michael Baldwin, put it more bluntly: “We walk into there [school] to learn, not to sit there and look at each other...we want to learn. We don’t care how we get it. We want it equally. We want it together.”<sup>34</sup>

Three years later, undaunted by little to no progress, many students and community members shared these same aspirations at more community forums in 1979. For example, local resident Burt Allie suggested at a meeting of the Instruction Committee (a board set to plan integration and hear community concerns) that desegregation would “enhance the probability that the students of North Division would have higher levels of achievement.”<sup>35</sup> At the same meeting, Venora McKinney, a North Division staff member and parent, agreed with Allie and added that “we recognize the need for integration...if for no other reason than we need it for the watchdog function.” She felt that white presence would facilitate “good and sound educational

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<sup>33</sup> Typescript of Minutes of the Meeting of the Finance and Facilities Committee, 3/25/76, Box 223, Folder 6, Lloyd Barbee papers.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Typescript of Minutes of the Meeting of the Instruction Committee, 5/1/79, Box 223, folder 7, Lloyd Barbee papers.

programs” through white parent participation. In her eyes, the mere existence of white students—and thus white parents—at North Division would make the school board more willing to listen to concerns and complaints from parents and staff and make improvements to the school.<sup>36</sup> At a meeting of the Board of School Directors later in the month, students once again showed their willingness to integrate.

The presence of Black girls in these meetings is clear and notable. Black women and girls participated at extremely high rates during community meetings on integration, and Black girls especially were the most likely group of students to speak out. Toni Pohl (a North Division student), for example, asked why her school couldn’t add white students instead of relocating existing Black students to new schools; LaRhonda Bearden, Willie Washington, and Veronica Jackson added to this point by stating that North Division could, indeed, fit several hundred white students into its existing student body.<sup>37</sup> These students had a point, too—the new North Division building *was* capable of incorporating several hundred new white students into its student body, a point that many Black families resented when their children were relocated to different schools to create a “better” balance. Additionally, student Camilla Nance argued at the School Directors meeting that the North Division student body would “welcome” whites into their school.<sup>38</sup>

These meetings were important for not only policy reasons, but also for dispelling common (racist) assumptions held by many white onlookers. The immense community participation in integration forums demonstrated the inaccuracy of the popular, paternalistic

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Typescript of Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of School Directors, 5/9/79, Box 223, Folder 7, Lloyd Barbee papers.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



narrative that Black students and families were apathetic and lazy. Community residents showed deep commitment, passion, and care for the cause of integrating their schools and improving their education overall. Ultimately, many students were genuinely optimistic that integration at North Division could happen without removing Black students from their “roots” at the school, and that integration could not only occur, but be peaceful, welcoming, and harmonious.<sup>39</sup>

Within the community meetings, a clear trend was revealed, one that has received neither enough scholarly attention nor proper recognition and appreciation: as previously noted, Black women and girls participated at high, if not disproportionate, rates during debates, and their contributions to education reform were immense. This is a point that should be evident from research and observation, but it is still frequently overlooked and is critically important to mention again. By studying the reports from dozens of separate meetings, such as those of the Board of School Directors and the Instruction Committee, readers can observe consistent Black female leadership and countless female community participants. The majority of meeting participants from North Division were female, and some of the most critical community voices were also women. Mothers, such as Pauline McKay; teachers, including Venora McKinney and others; more visible public leaders, such as Marian McEvelly, an elected school board member, and Joyce Mallory, the education chair for the Milwaukee NAACP chapter; and dozens of female students all played pivotal roles in articulating their own concerns and the concerns of the community.<sup>40</sup>

While male leaders such as Lloyd Barbee, and later Howard Fuller, are rightly praised and extensively covered in civil rights historiography, the contributions of Black female leaders

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Box 223, Folders 6-7, Lloyd Barbee papers.

and grassroots participants deserves more attention and credit. These women and girls poignantly and powerfully delivered crucial messages to Milwaukee's power brokers and ultimately played a key role in changing public opinion for North Division. Other important leadership from Black women came in different forms of protest, such as those for open housing ordinances, and is highlighted in the works of Dougherty, Jones, Miner, and Nelsen. Black women and girls played similarly significant parts in later reforms, which I will discuss in the following sections of this paper. Their role in the integration debates of the late 1970s deserves particular focus for the sheer volume of their contributions.

The optimism of the North Division community was not fully repaid by the School Board and the ultimate integration plan. Although the new North Division, a stupendously upgraded facility, would be built near the site of the original high school, not all of North Division's Black population would be allowed to remain.<sup>41</sup> The final decision was to open North Division as a citywide magnet school in order to attract white students. The choice of medical sciences as the school's "magnet specialty" was widely praised by city and board leadership as a step in the right direction for the school. However, the controversy around the plan during the final years of the integration era—when the Milwaukee School Board lost its last court case and was finally forced to admit to segregating schools—was only the beginning of a larger controversy around North Division as a cultural and community hub.<sup>42</sup>

The desegregation era at North Division teaches many lessons, including several that would play out at the school in future years. For one thing, students and community members proved their commitment to equitable reform. Unfortunately, the period also showed how

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<sup>41</sup> The building was completed in 1978.

<sup>42</sup> The issue was only truly "solved" through an out-of-court settlement.

difficult it was to pass through reform, especially with stagnant and stubborn governing bodies. Perhaps the most overlooked takeaway was that Black women participated at disproportionate levels in integration debates and were critical in decision-making at the school. These lessons would echo in future years, and continue to give important reminders about community participation today. As was the case during the 1960s and 1970s, North Division would continue to feature prominently in future discussions of equity and reform during the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. The later reform movements were centered around community participation as well. Arguments over community control, cultural education, and structural reform would continue to prove the immense contributions of the local community, particularly Black women and girls, as well as the compassion, passion, and power of grassroots activism.

### **Post-desegregation, deregulation, and “Save North Division,” 1979-1990**

While the desegregation period in Milwaukee is certainly the most talked-about phase of the city’s civil rights struggle, it was not the only key timeframe. Nor did it exist in a vacuum: the decisions of the desegregation period had far-reaching consequences for years to come, especially at North Division. The period after integration at North Division High School shared similarities with, but also had key differences from, other newly integrated schools in Milwaukee and across the United States.

Studies have shown that, across the nation, integration was generally successful in shrinking the achievement gap between Black and white students. The argument that the presence of white students affected administrative oversight, in the form of more board attention and better resources, appears in hindsight to be mostly true. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes in her piece “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” that the *South*—the frontline of integration opposition—actually had the nation’s “most integrated school

systems” by the 1980s, and that these systems yielded huge benefits for Black students, including “smaller classes, superior facilities, and other benefits.”<sup>43</sup> In fact, some cities, such as Charlotte, North Carolina, had integration outcomes that were “such a point of civic pride” that even many Republicans were not supportive of Ronald Reagan’s attacks on court-ordered busing and integration.<sup>44</sup> In Milwaukee, schools were not exempt from this success, and many integrated schools—see Riverside and Rufus King, and later (somewhat ironically named) Ronald Reagan High School—are still seen as great points of civic pride for their heterogenous student bodies and their academic and extracurricular successes.

The integration movement at North Division, however, was less successful, and carried much more racialized and controversial decisions than other schools. The first reason, as this paper has already discussed, is that integrating North Division meant *removing* a substantial share of the school’s Black student population. Rather than being able to retain a majority of its students, as most other high schools were, North Division was forced to relocate nearly half of its student body to meet the required quotas set in the citywide integration plan.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, there was the aforementioned resentment and sadness that the brand-new North Division building would not be used to meet the needs of the Black community but rather to support hundreds of white students—students who displaced two grades of Black North Division juniors and seniors.<sup>46</sup> The resentment was not towards white students—in fact, as was mentioned by

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<sup>43</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005):1256.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 1255.

<sup>45</sup> Birmingham, “A Chronology of the Integration of the Milwaukee Public Schools 1963–1976 with Emphasis on the Course of the De Facto Segregation Suit and Addendum” and Montgomery, “School Desegregation Planning, Milwaukee 1976 Chronology, Plans, and Participants.”

<sup>46</sup> Birmingham, “A Chronology of the Integration of the Milwaukee Public Schools 1963–1976 with Emphasis on the Course of the De Facto Segregation Suit and Addendum”; Montgomery,

many North Division students and staff, white students would be welcomed to the school—but rather against the school board and the plan that ironically created a new community pillar in the North Division neighborhood but excluded much of the neighborhood itself from it. The presence of a beautiful, state-of-the-art facility unusable for the same Black students and families that fought for its creation seemed cruelly ironic and unfair. The perceptions about integration—losing the right to the school, displacing Black students, and retreating on the cultural and community significance of the school—led to community strife and, ultimately, the “Save North Division” movement of the 1980s.

In the years immediately following the 1979 *Amos* court decision and the succeeding integration plans it brought to life, North Division had to get creative and make difficult decisions about how to comply with regulations. Again, it was Black women in particular who played the largest part in these efforts. As has been previously discussed, the demographics and size of the school, as well as anti-Black racism and rumor mongering amongst some white Milwaukeeans, made it much difficult to integrate North Division. Specifically, it was very hard to recruit white students to enroll. The first years of desegregation at North Division saw minimal white enrollment, and with numerical integration standards to meet, the school needed to find ways to attract white students. Many parents from North Division and other schools took matters into their own hands by making phone calls, hosting forums, and giving tours to potential white students and families.<sup>47</sup> Black women, along with some white allies, led this recruitment effort; some hundreds of mothers from Milwaukee schools were successful in convincing white

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“School Desegregation Planning, Milwaukee 1976 Chronology, Plans, and Participants”; and Sampson, Pamela J, “Options – School Desegregation.”

<sup>47</sup> Nelsen, “Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools,” 97.

families to consider their schools through their grassroots efforts.<sup>48</sup> Even with these vigorous and intensive recruitment efforts, though, the school still struggled to meet integration quotas. MPS did not provide a strong recruitment effort to bring white students to North Division, and the voluntary nature of their plan was ineffective at North. Voluntary integration programs simply did not attract enough white students to North Division, with only 36 white students out of 1,400 students on “opening day” at the new North Division facility in 1978.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it was eventually decided that North Division would house a medical specialty to recruit/entice white families to enroll their students. This decision was the start of a new period of intense debate and controversy at North Division.

The route chosen by the School Board was one that had an initial flaw that may have doomed it from the start: there simply was not enough community input and consideration. Interestingly enough, the plan to convert North Division to a medical specialty was actually considered a success by the board itself; many members felt that it would be the saving grace to help the school reach its integration goals.<sup>50</sup> However, the community response from the North Division neighborhood was swift and strong, with many people aligning themselves against the plan. As was the case in earlier integration planning, the lack of focus on community opinions greatly hurt the Board’s plan. A 1983 article published in the *Journal of Negro Education* highlighted this failure directly:

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>49</sup> Dougherty “More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee,” 165.

<sup>50</sup> Dougherty, “More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee” and Nelsen, “Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools.”

If the black parents had been included in the original planning process, they might have been able to work out a compromise with the school board that would have allowed North Division to be a neighborhood high school with a specialty program component. Since the Committee of 100 [desegregation planning committee] did not adequately represent the points of view of these parents, they had to organize outside official channels to have their grievances heard.”<sup>51</sup>

The “organization outside of official channels” that scholar and professor Ian M. Harris, author of the aforementioned article, describes came in the form of the “Save North Division” Movement in the early 1980s. This movement can be considered the ultimate success for Black grassroots activists at North Division, as it ultimately caused the School Board to reverse its decision. Additionally, its legacy should be remembered as one that highlights the power of local protest but also the administrative failures that made it necessary.

The “Save North Division” movement was significantly shorter in duration than the prior desegregation debates at the school, and it was conceived out of a single issue: the plan to convert North Division into a medical specialty. This “single issue” did, of course, carry the histories of many other issues, such as underrepresentation of Black voices in democratic structures, inequitable student movement, the “unequal burden” of integration, and systemic racism as a whole. However, the specificity of the Board’s decision made it possible for Black activists to channel their energy into a single decision; within this focused protest, their other concerns over the aforementioned injustices could be discussed and contextualized.

Significantly, the movement was shorter because, to put it frankly, the pressure exerted by the

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<sup>51</sup> Ian M. Harris, “Criteria for Evaluating School Desegregation in Milwaukee,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1983): 433.

North Division community was enough to swiftly change the minds of the school board. Within about a year, the decision to make North Division a medical specialty was reversed.<sup>52</sup>“Save North Division” must be considered a success for grassroots activists in the North Division area. However, the fight for educational improvement at North Division did not end with the school board reversal. In fact, the most controversial movement was not “Save North Division,” but rather the fight from Dr. Howard Fuller and several other prominent Black leaders to create an independent school district centered around the school.

### **The “New North Division School District” (1987-1988)**

The 1980s were a period rife with controversy around North Division. While the school was certainly no stranger to controversy, it was the 1987 proposal to create an independent Black school district that would prove the most contentious. In particular, it was the pushback from a huge number of community leaders that made this move so highly contested and controversial.

The “New North Division School District” did not simply appear out of nowhere. In fact, it should not come as a huge surprise at all, as it was the product of years of frustration. The idea for an independent North Division school district was born out of ideas about Black autonomy and community control. The school’s unchanging rates of academic improvement, as defined by test scores and graduation rates, was enough to frustrate students and families alike. Even after the reforms of the 1970s and early 1980s, North Division was struggling in many metrics throughout the decade. Much of the frustration was directed at MPS. Many families felt that the Milwaukee Public Schools did not fully understand the needs of Black students, and that this lack of awareness was a leading factor in the school’s struggles. These concerns were well

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<sup>52</sup> Dougherty, “More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee,” 184 and 187.



articulated by former MPS student, Kevin Ingraham, in a 1988 testimony before the state assembly. Ingraham stated that MPS found it “difficult to relate [to] and understand” Black children, and that the district was using the “excuse that it is difficult to educate Black and Poor children” to justify low scores at North Division and other predominantly Black high schools.<sup>53</sup> Feeling that leadership from within the North Division community would be better suited to help address the students’ needs, Dr. Howard Fuller and Representative Polly Williams ultimately proposed a “New North Division School District.”

As controversial as the new district structure was, what was most controversial was the idea of separation itself. The actual plans were relatively straightforward, and not completely radical compared to the “regular” MPS setup. The new district would have enjoyed the privileges of MPS and other school districts around the state, with multiple tax-based sources for funding and an initial \$35 million budget allotment.<sup>54</sup> The district was actually intended to work *with* MPS on many fronts, including maintaining partnerships with local employers and colleges.<sup>55</sup> The biggest difference from MPS was obvious: the proposed district would be geographically selective, containing students and families in a rough square between from 35<sup>th</sup> Street to the west, Capitol Drive to the north, Tenth Street (with a section jutting out to Eighth Street) to the east, and North Avenue (with a section jutting out to Brown Street) to the south—a large portion of the predominantly-Black North side of Milwaukee.<sup>56</sup> However, the plan made it clear that all students would be welcome in the new district, including other students of color and white

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<sup>53</sup> Testimony of Kevin Ingram Before the Assembly Education Committee, Wisconsin State Assembly, 15 February 1988, Box 3, Marcia P. Coggs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>54</sup> “The New North Division School District,” 1987, Box 3, Marcia P. Coggs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

students, and it was going to be an active participant in the new Chapter 220 program (designed to help integrate suburban and city schools through busing). These participatory goals disproved a common critique that a new district would “strip” students of the opportunity to partner with and learn in “area colleges, universities and other suburban school districts.”<sup>57</sup> The audacious part of the plan was leaving MPS, a step that had never been taken before; in terms of the logistical planning, though, the proposed independent district was fairly clear-cut and better prepared than opponents may have believed.

The context of the proposal’s creators is nearly as important as the proposal itself. Dr. Howard Fuller and Representative Polly Williams were the public faces of the independent North Division district movement. Both were experienced community leaders, and were highly respected for their activism. Fuller, now 80, is a true jack of all trades, with experience in community organizing, higher education, and later public school leadership; Williams was a pioneering politician and community leader, most famous for her time as an assemblywoman and her later support of school choice and vouchers.<sup>58</sup> While many other voices were key in the “New North Division” project—especially female community members such as MPS school members Joyce Mallory and Jeanette Mitchell, who were influential voices in their own right, have not received as much attention as male religious and political leaders—Williams and Fuller were truly the spokespeople for the movement, partaking in high-profile interviews and campaigning, but also bearing the blunt force of public criticism. The two were a powerful pairing, appearing as allies in later debates on school choice as well. However, during their push

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<sup>57</sup> Remarks to the Assembly Concerning MPS’ Commitment to Quality Education, by Dr. Hawthorne Faison, 24 February 1988, Box 3, Marcia P. Coggs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>58</sup> Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*.

to create an independent North Division school district, they faced intense opposition from white politicians and heated pushback from many in the Black community as well.

While Fuller and Williams were certainly no strangers to controversy when they proposed the independent district—both were, after all, Black education pioneers operating in white-dominated and often hostile spaces—their proposal may have been the most hotly contested project of their lives. Opposition to the “New North Division School District” was swift and severe, and perhaps most importantly, it was widespread. While the plan did have its supporters, most prominently from the oft-cited professor and legal scholar Derrick Bell, the dissent to the plan was strong.<sup>59</sup> The response of prominent Black leaders in Milwaukee was particularly harsh. In the early months of 1988, the year the proposed bill would go to a vote, several high-profile Black leaders in the city came forward in opposition to the proposed district. In a series of articles written in January, UWM professor Dr. Walter C. Farrell, Jr. wrote scathing criticism of the proposed district, claiming it would create an “urban Bantustan” of the likes of apartheid South Africa and that the true strongest supporters of the plan were “racists” and “white conservatives” who “openly opposed black progress in the past and in the present.”<sup>60</sup> Farrell added that most students and families in desegregation studies favored integrated schools, and that he viewed the independent district as both “illegal” and irresponsible in promoting

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<sup>59</sup> Derrick Bell, “Control Not Color: The Real Issue In The Milwaukee Manifesto,” *Milwaukee Journal*, 30 September 1987, Box 3, Marcia P. Coggs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>60</sup> Walter C. Farrell, Jr., “The Proposed Black School District, Part I: Legal, Socioeconomic, and Political Issues,” 27 January 1988, Box 3, Marcia P. Coggs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

Walter C. Farrell, Jr., “The Proposed Black School District, Part II: Its Negative Multiplier Effects,” 31 January 1988, Box 3, Marcia P. Coggs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

segregation.<sup>61</sup> Farrell did not mince words in criticizing the new district's supporters, either, writing they "skillfully misrepresented research" to boost their argument and calling their plan "not fully developed."<sup>62</sup> These comments, the most critical of which insinuated that racists were the biggest supporters of the new plan, made Farrell perhaps the most strongly-worded critic of the new district, but he was hardly alone in his opinions.

A month after Farrell's articles, MPS superintendent Dr. Hawthorne Faison voiced his predictable opposition in front of the state assembly. Faison used similar arguments as Farrell, citing the "unconstitutional[ity]" of an independent North Division district.<sup>63</sup> Faison, however, focused even more heavily on the moral argument that creating a "segregated" district was wrong and that it would "communicate to our children and our society that the state of Wisconsin thinks that separation is the way to go."<sup>64</sup> Faison similarly worried that the new district "reek[ed] of racism" by excluding other racial and ethnic groups, and that the overall message sent would be one of "separation and division."<sup>65</sup> Faison reasoned that this message would not only harm students by stripping them of the "great...potential" of integrated schools, but also that it would negatively affect national perception of Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin.<sup>66</sup> As the superintendent of MPS, Dr. Faison also had logistical reasons to oppose the district. As he told the assembly, a separate North Division district would "impede MPS' ability to meet its desegregation obligations, would impair our efforts to achieve a less racially polarized society,

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<sup>61</sup> Farrell, Jr., "The Proposed Black School District, Part I: Legal, Socioeconomic, and Political Issues," Marcia P. Coggs Papers.

<sup>62</sup> Farrell, Jr., "The Proposed Black School District, Part II: Its Negative Multiplier Effects," Marcia P. Coggs Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Remarks to the Assembly Concerning MPS' Commitment to Quality Education, by Dr. Hawthorne Faison, Marcia P. Coggs Papers.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

and destroy the intended long-run success of the settlement plan.”<sup>67</sup> He also cited similar rationale as Dr. Farrell by stating that the “majority of minority parents” supported MPS and integration plans.<sup>68</sup>

It should be noted Faison was put in a bind as MPS superintendent, and that politically, it may have been necessary for him to make these comments; still, the bitter irony of these statements is ripe. The “New North Division” never advocated for separatism from whites, and was even openly welcoming to white students. Furthermore, the only reason the “New North Division” was proposed was to gain more community control; it was MPS that Fuller and others wanted space from, not whites. The district logic of alleged anti-white racism also left a particular bad taste for many who still had the blatant anti-Black racism of intact busing fresh in their minds. Thus, while Faison may have made many of his comments out of political necessity, they still appeared ironic and unfair to some. Ultimately, Faison, Farrell, and others won the debate over the proposed North Division school district: the measure was struck down in the state Senate later in 1988, with considerable opposition.<sup>69</sup> However, the arguments of the plan’s supporters are worth a critical observation, as they reflect larger issues of self-determination, community pride, and grassroots activism.

One of the more controversial opinions shared by both Dr. Hawthorne Faison and Dr. Walter C. Farrell, Jr. was that a separate district would, as Dr. Faison put it, “harm Blacks directly...or indirectly as members of the general society” by removing them from contact with

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> *Milwaukee Times*, “Senate kills proposal for separate district,” 5 April 1988, Box 3, Marcia P. Cogs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

whites.<sup>70</sup> Dr. Farrell echoed this concern with his own claim that one of the goals of education should be to help minority students succeed in “mainstream society.”<sup>71</sup> He argued that “academic skills alone...did not allow black Americans to enter the mainstream occupations and opportunities that are so abundant in our society,” and that creating a separate district would only “serve to limit their [minority students’] aspirations and opportunities.”<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, the two men agreed that desegregation was the best route for success, and that the proposed district would inhibit the successes made possible by integrated schooling. These views may have been shared by many, but they were also used as ammunition by the proponents of a new district.

In their eyes, Doctors Faison and Farrell confirmed their worst suspicions: that the district did not believe Black students could succeed without white students and teachers, and that MPS was using this as an excuse for the low test scores at North Division and other predominantly Black schools. To supporters of the North Division district, this showed a lack of faith in Black students and could be perceived as a slap in the face to Black students and teachers. In particular, parents and families who supported the new district saw MPS oversight as a central focus of reform; to parents who felt their voices were not being heard, the MPS response may have seemed like a frustrating, defensive maneuver. As Marquette University professor Peter Murrell Jr. put it, “Dr. Fuller, Representative...Williams...and other proponents of the New North Division School District represent a community struggling to improve the quality of education for its children...Dr. Faison represents a bureaucracy.”<sup>73</sup> This sentiment also went against the

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<sup>70</sup> Remarks to the Assembly Concerning MPS’ Commitment to Quality Education, by Dr. Hawthorne Faison, Marcia P. Coggs Papers.

<sup>71</sup> Farrell, Jr., “The Proposed Black School District, Part II: Its Negative Multiplier Effects,” Marcia P. Coggs Papers.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, 134.

supporters of Black pride and Black Power, some of whom were also supporters of an independent North Division district, who pushed back against the idea that success for the Black community rested on being part of the white “mainstream.” Again, the supporters viewed the district as unresponsive to their needs, preferring for community control that would be better in tune with the realities of the North side community.

As was seen in previous protest, there was a strong element of Black female participation that deserves far more credit and attention. On a list of influential individuals who supported the “New North Division” district, a majority (15 of 27) were women.<sup>74</sup> These were political leaders, community organizers, executives, and administrators who took political risks in supporting the new district. This was no small point: such a bold and controversial policy proposal does not exist in a vacuum, and these women put a lot on the line in terms of reputation and political and career standing in supporting it. The Black Women’s Network, a prominent community organization, also stood in support of the new district.<sup>75</sup> The support given by these women, as well as the public opinion that they influenced by using their platforms, cannot be overlooked.

The biggest lesson to be learned from the “New North Division” proposal is that grassroots activists at the school proved that their influence and participation wasn’t going anywhere. The uproar over a potential new district was harsh, but even in the project’s defeat, its proponents showcased a creative, well-thought venture. The talking points that the proposal provided—and the controversy it created locally and nationally—were hugely significant, returning attention to the plight of underfunded and neglected high schools in Milwaukee and urban areas in major cities in general. North Division’s advocates may not have won their new

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<sup>74</sup> Partial List of Individuals and Organizations who are Supporting this Proposal, Box 3, Marcia P. Coggs Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

district, but they rightfully won an increased pressure on the school district to pay heed to their community-oriented concerns.

### **North Division in the choice era and new millennium (1990-present)**

The 1988 rejection of the “New North Division school district” proposal marked the end of one era of grassroots reform at North Division. It would hardly be the last. The 1990s were a tumultuous time for public education in the United States, especially in Milwaukee, and some of North Division’s most famous champions became nationally famous for their role in the school choice movement. Moreover, the City of Milwaukee became the center of the voucher movement, the most controversial arm of the school choice movement, and Dr. Howard Fuller and Representative Polly Williams helped create this focus. Before introducing North Division’s own story in the 1990s and 2000s, it is important to explore the legacies of Polly Williams and Howard Fuller as national figures, as well as the legacy of Milwaukee as the voucher capital of the United States.

#### *North Division’s own: Williams and Fuller and the voucher movement*

The 1980s began with the era of Ronald Reagan, and they ended with a strong conservative consensus dedicated to continuing his policies of austerity, religious freedom, and privatization. Reagan’s doctrine extended well past traditional politics, rooting itself in education as well. One of the most significant and controversial privatization causes in American history is that of voucher schooling. While charter schools are significant and controversial themselves—they do have questions of oversight and public funding—they are nowhere near as polarizing as vouchers. The basic philosophy of voucher schooling is to provide students with a taxpayer-funded cash “voucher” to attend a school of their choice. This essentially turns private schools into publicly-funded endeavors, including religious schools and for-profit endeavors. Vouchers,



in many cases, require little to no oversight—they do not, for example, have to report on test scores or academic progress measures—and can often “circumvent a host of nondiscrimination requirements” such as handicap-friendly accommodations.<sup>76</sup> In other words, it is truly private education, funded by public money. While charters have long been a part of Milwaukee’s educational history, they had their origins elsewhere; by contrast, Milwaukee is “ground zero” in the voucher movement, with the nation’s “oldest and largest voucher program,” started in 1990, that has inspired other major cities.<sup>77</sup>

The most unique thing about vouchers in Milwaukee is that they were not exclusively the work of high-profile Republicans. While a great deal of the funding (almost \$50 million in total from 1986 to 2003) did come from the ultraconservative and ultra-controversial Bradley Foundation and its powerful allies, it was Black community advocates who helped gain the program greater support and recognition.<sup>78</sup> While Bradley Foundation president Michael Joyce used his political clout to earn grants to turn Milwaukee into a “showcase for public policy reforms [conservatives] sought nationwide,” much of the public debate over vouchers was raised by North Division’s own Howard Fuller and Polly Williams.<sup>79</sup> Fuller championed school choice in a 1989 education forum, which elevated the issue as a “major” reform strategy. Williams, meanwhile, introduced the ultimately successfully voucher bill and helped stir up support.<sup>80</sup> The response was enormous: prominent conservative and conservative-leaning bodies, including think tanks and the *Wall Street Journal*, sang the praises of the program before it even began.

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<sup>76</sup> Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, 135.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>80</sup> Holt, qtd. in Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, 169.

Even the president, George H.W. Bush, “heaped accolades” on the voucher experiment.<sup>81</sup> The stage was set for a high-stakes voucher movement to take form.

The importance of the Wisconsin voucher bill to the North Division story is that, in its original form, the bill was intended to impact the students in and around the North Division neighborhood. The scale was small, and the bill stipulated that vouchers could only be granted to low-income students. Its goal was clear: to give poor families the option to send their children to the school of their choice. This logic is not too different from the logic of “New North Division” proponents: create a separate space/platform for the Black community to make its own education decisions. The logic, while not without its own flaws, ultimately did seek the best interests of Milwaukee’s Black school-age population, and worked outside the normal limits of the bureaucracy to bring it about. Unfortunately, as Williams would note, the low-income voucher movement was hijacked by the larger, fat-pocketed conservative voucher movement in favor of universal vouchers for all students and all types of schools. Although many other important reforms (and failed reforms) occurred between 1990 and 1995, including “African-American immersion” schools to teach about Black history culture and a failed \$366 million referendum to help MPS, these topics deserve more attention than this thesis can provide, and will thus be dully noted but left for future research.<sup>82</sup> 1995 brought about the next major change in the voucher movement, one that dramatically affected Howard Fuller, Polly Williams, North Division, and public schools across the state.

By 1995, Howard Fuller and Polly Williams had started to drift apart on their views on vouchers. On one hand, Dr. Fuller had just finished his time as the MPS superintendent and was

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<sup>81</sup> Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, 171.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 188 and 194.

moving to a new position at Marquette University (funded by the Bradley Foundation).<sup>83</sup> Fuller put a great deal of backing into a new voucher law that would expand eligibility for vouchers and allow for vouchers to pay tuition at religious private schools. This was obviously a point of great frustration for many liberals and those who believed in religious schools existing completely separately from the public funding sphere. As Milwaukee writer and former reporter Barbara Miner saw it, the new proposal was “a strategic advance toward the conservative goal of universal vouchers.”<sup>84</sup> While Fuller lent his support to expanded vouchers, Williams had her doubts and began to pull back support when she felt that conservative lawmakers were using their resources “to co-opt” people fighting for Black children, rather than “empower[ing]” them.<sup>85</sup> Williams had a right to be wary. Years later, *Milwaukee Journal* editor David Behrendt revealed that a “prominent Milwaukee business executive” told him off the record that taxpayer dollars were being put into vouchers “to save” Catholic schools; Behrendt said that conservatives were clearly using Williams’ publicly-pronounced goals of improving education as the excuse to give religious schools money, and that conservatives “expected, correctly, that the Supreme Court of *this state* would never strike vouchers down as unconstitutional.”<sup>86</sup> While she could not have known this at the time, Williams did begin to publicly state her grievances with other evidence. She told *USA Today* in 1995 that she was made the “poster girl” by conservatives—“as long as it appeared [she] was supporting their case...Blacks and poors are being used to help legitimize them as a power group.”<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, it was Fuller who became a sought-after

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>86</sup> Behrendt, qtd. in Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, 198.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, qtd. in Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, 205.

spokesperson for conservative groups in their fight to provide vouchers to religious schools. He stood his ground in sticking with vouchers; Williams stood hers in refusing to be what she perceived as a “poster girl” for an agenda that went well past her own wishes.

The voucher movement has several clear ties to North Division, and several that are less straightforward as well. The most obvious is that the two true superstars of the voucher movement, in Milwaukee and on the national stage, were North Division graduates. Howard Fuller and Polly Williams weren’t just graduates, either: they were grassroots activists through North Division’s many changes as well. It can be fairly argued that no two people had as big of an impact on the rise of vouchers than Fuller and Williams; for better or for worse, it can also be argued that no two Black leaders did more for legitimizing the religious-educational agenda of the Republican Party. While North Division itself was not a voucher school itself, as it was and is a public school, it did produce the two biggest figures in the voucher movement. It also produced the circumstances that lead to Fuller and Williams fighting for vouchers in the first place.

This is the second, less apparent legacy of North Division in the voucher movement. The arguments used by Fuller and Williams in their defense of vouchers stemmed from the same concerns that North Division had seen for decades: namely, the hope for parents to seize control over their children’s’ educational experience by having greater choice and a greater say in decision-making. As Polly Williams put it, her goal was never to harm MPS; rather, it was to “show the Milwaukee Public Schools that, see, if parents had more say, see how much better off the student would be. And to replicate that in the public schools.”<sup>88</sup> This argument runs parallel

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<sup>88</sup> Williams, qtd. in Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, 204.

to the arguments in creating a new North Division independent school district, when proponents posited that greater family involvement in decision-making was the key to success in Milwaukee's public schools. In fact, Williams' reference to "replicating" the voucher *philosophy* in public schools seems to be a direct commentary on her (and Fuller's) frustrations with MPS not giving communities more of a voice; this almost certainly stems from her experience with past movements at North Division, where these same goals were broadcast by herself, Dr. Fuller, and countless other North Division students, families, and community members. Thus, while vouchers themselves were not applicable at North, their motivations (and perhaps inspirations) were directly connected to the numerous North Division movements for community involvement and control.

#### *North Division's other current reforms*

While the voucher controversy was the story of the decade in Milwaukee education circles, North Division itself went through its own dramatic changes in the 1990s and the new millennium as well. Unfortunately, even after the many movements of the previous decades, and even with Howard Fuller as the superintendent, many of the concerns at North Division were not properly addressed. Consequently, many of the same problems of low test scores and other metrics remained. The frustration from families and community members remained, and the calls for reform continued. The situation at North, and certainly at countless other high schools, was further complicated by the election of George W. Bush in 2000 and the new "No Child Left Behind" policy for the nation's public schools. While many other changes occurred in the 1990s that affected North Division and Black students in general—see the difficulties posed by the politicized end to allegedly "forced" busing, the overhaul of all integration policies, and the open enrollment system that unquestionably privileged wealthier and whiter students—it was "No

Child Left Behind” that had the greatest direct impact on the functioning of public high schools like North Division.<sup>89</sup> “No Child Left Behind” was, in fact, the nail in the coffin for North Division. It ultimately led to the most radical change possible, the nuclear option: the closing of North Division.

It should first be noted that every period discussed in this paper had local and national policies that affected North Division. It would be foolish and untrue to suggest that the school was not impacted by outside factors. However, in all those eras, it was grassroots activism that was the most important factor in reform at North Division. “No Child Left Behind,” however, had the greatest influence of any policy, and was arguably—sadly—the largest factor in reform at the school in the early 2000s. “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) was a brutal blow for struggling public schools. Regardless of its intentions, the impact it had on the schools it defined as “low-achieving” were harmful. With its goal of yearly progress for every school, NCLB set up a system of punitive measures designed to incentivize schools to reach yearly goals; these proved to simply put testing ahead of learning, and often resulted in the schools in need of the most help getting *less* funding and more punishment, including punitive sanctions and even “restructuring” by *private companies* after repeated “failures.”<sup>90</sup>

NCLB ignored research that consistently showed, and continues to show, that family income is the most important predictor of success on standardized tests, not individual teachers.

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<sup>89</sup> For more on the impact “No Child Left Behind” had on Milwaukee schools, see the section “No Child Left Behind. Really?” of Barbara Miner’s *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*.

<sup>90</sup> Miner, *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*. For more on “NCLB” requirements in Milwaukee, readers can look at the article “MPS plan targets weakest schools – To get federal funds, district must retool worst performers” by *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reporter Erin Richards. This touches on localized implications of “NCLB” standards for schools such as North Division.

By setting the stakes so high on standardized tests, NCLB doomed poorer schools, who not only had more students from lower-income families but also typically less-experienced teachers and more students of color (standardized tests have also been shown to disproportionately privilege whites).<sup>91</sup> It was also unrealistic to label “failing” schools as the cause of student “failure”—NCLB didn’t take into consideration the myriad other problems facing schools like North Division, including intense segregation and redlining and the systemic racism that affects everything from the job market to permanent housing. Education is a central component to individual accomplishment, but it is absurd to list it as the only factor. By failing to account for these other obstacles, NCLB and its self-prescribed measures for success and failure doomed many schools from the start.

“No Child Left Behind” was ultimately the final tipping point for the first iteration of North Division High School. When test scores did not meet NCLB standards and the school didn’t meet the district’s expectations, MPS decided to close North Division’s doors in 2004 and redesignate the space as three separate charter schools. The decision came after nearly 100 years of learning inside North’s walls; while the building remained, the essence of the school itself was gone. The plan was constructed in 2003, with the goal of “battle[ing] high dropout rates with more personalized, intimate high school programs” at five of the largest Milwaukee high schools (North Division, South Division, Bradley Tech, Marshall, and Washington).<sup>92</sup> The strategy itself was not a new concept—the “small schools” model has been around since the mid-1990s, and received significant funding from Bill Gates and other philanthropists—but it was nonetheless a

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<sup>91</sup> There are countless studies on race, wealth, and standardized tests. One good reference may be a very recent article published by John Rosales and Tim Walker for the National Education Association entitled “The Racist Beginnings of Standardized Testing.”

<sup>92</sup> Sarah Carr, “Dramatic reconfiguration at MPS endorsed - Smaller schools would be carved out of five high schools.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), November 12, 2003.

major change for North Division and the other four schools of 1,000+ student enrollment.<sup>93</sup> North Division went through its transition to three small schools in 2003-2004, with mixed results. The three new schools (called Genesis, Humanities, and Truth) had different start times and other ways to create the sense of “distinction” between the schools.<sup>94</sup> However, some students still said they felt like they wanted the “North feeling” of the larger school, and others were unaware that the project was happening until they arrived on the first day. By the fall of 2004, each of the three small schools was certified as a charter school. However, the School of Humanities was plagued by low enrollment, and amidst other concerns it closed in 2006.<sup>95</sup> The “small schools” experiment would only last another three years.

Ultimately, the Milwaukee Public Schools deemed that the “small schools” effort at North Division was not the future of the school. After only a few years, and much scrutiny, then-MPS superintendent William Andrekopoulos announced the closing of charter schools at North Division and the plan to bring back a “large, comprehensive city high school” in the North Division building.<sup>96</sup> North Division would reopen its doors as a single school in 2010. The opening itself is noteworthy for two primary reasons. For one thing, it did not reopen without controversy. A group of “almost 100 parents and residents” voiced their displeasure about the small schools closing at a school board meeting in 2009, the year before the reopening of

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<sup>93</sup> For more on the “small schools” movement, see “Five More Choices, 1987-2013,” chapter six of James K. Nelsen’s *Educating Milwaukee: How One City’s History of Segregation and Struggle Shaped its Schools*.

<sup>94</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “Initiatives rapidly reshaping MPS – Officials’ plans alter programs, close and move schools.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), January 23, 2004.

<sup>95</sup> Alan J. Borsuk, “Fights, financial trouble blamed for school’s demise – MPS hastens closure of charter high school amid continued misbehavior.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), October 19, 2006.

<sup>96</sup> Erin Richards, “MPS targets charter schools Six face closure – North Division reversion sought.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), March 7, 2009.



“comprehensive” North Division.<sup>97</sup> The primary talking point was that the small schools model was phased out too quickly, and that there was a “lack of stability” in North Division’s structure.<sup>98</sup> School Board Director Charlene Hardin attempted to renew the charter for Truth, one of the small schools in the North Division building, but her motion failed.<sup>99</sup> This protest is significant because it shows the continued community involvement in North Division affairs, and it signals a common cyclical concern: that MPS was too quick to “move on” from North Division. This perceived impatience carries over to the second reason the reopening of North Division was so noteworthy: the continued influence of nationally mandated test score requirements.

“No Child Left Behind” had influence on the 2010 reopening in a major way. Milwaukee was slotted to receive \$45 million in federal funding for schools with lower test scores, but they had to “aggressive[ly]” close “low-performing” schools, reopen them as either charters or privately-run schools, and replace administration.<sup>100</sup> This meant that the large Milwaukee African-American Immersion (MAAI) charter, located in the North Division building, would give a contract (via MPS) to a for-profit company to “turn around” the school.<sup>101</sup> After negotiations, a controversial for-profit called Mosaica Turnaround Partners was announced as the contract-winner for MAAI.<sup>102</sup> The company decided to return to a comprehensive (charter) high

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<sup>97</sup> Erin Richards, “Parents oppose MPS plans to overhaul North Division.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), March 11, 2009.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Erin Richards, “MPS plan targets weakest schools: To get federal funds, district must retool worst performers.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), March 12, 2010.

<sup>101</sup> Becky Vevea, “Two firms to present plans for restarting North Division, boosting performance – Milwaukee aims to use federal funding for underachieving high school.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), December 16, 2010.

<sup>102</sup> Erin Richards, “MPS agrees to close, merge, move schools – Board considers new charter operations, Oks one at North.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), March 31, 2011.

school at North Division starting the following year.<sup>103</sup> Thus, North Division would take on a “newer” form in the 2011-2012 school year. Perhaps the most revealing quote from the North Division restart came from Director Charlene Hardin, who articulated the primary concern with “No Child Left Behind” standards: “(These students) may not be (scoring) above average for the district, but they are above average from when they walked in the door.”<sup>104</sup> In other words, the algorithms of NCLB did not address students as individuals, and the harsh punishments for “underachieving” schools weren’t giving schools a chance to improve over a reasonable-enough period of time. While “No Child Left Behind” was ended in 2015, the Obama-administration rules for public schools will certainly impact North and other Milwaukee schools going forward.

In the last few years, North Division has seen its fair share of new controversy, but with a familiar face in the center of it all. In 2017, the school made headlines for a student-lead protest over unsafe drinking water at its drinking fountains. Shaniya Liberty and other female students played a key part in this story, leading a protest and serving as speakers to crowds and the press. According to the protesting group, the district showed a “lack of urgency and transparency” in addressing concerns that student fountains had unsafe drinking water, while faculty fountains had filters; according to the *Journal Sentinel*, “neither side provided documentation” to prove or disprove this allegation.<sup>105</sup> While the protest in 2017 was short in duration and highly specific in its goals—getting an answer from MPS on the drinking fountains and providing filters for the student fountains—the concerns over MPS oversight, or lack thereof, felt very similar to earlier protest movements in previous decades. As Liberty defiantly put it, “MPS has constantly tried to

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Richards, “Parents oppose MPS plans to overhaul North Division.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), March 11, 2009.

<sup>105</sup> Annysa Johnson, “Students at Milwaukee’s North Division High raise concerns about drinking water quality.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), May 2, 2017.

diminish us...[but] our voices are going to be heard.”<sup>106</sup> Her spirit should certainly provide confidence in this generation’s leadership core at North Division.

North Division came back in the news just a year later. In 2018, Dr. Howard Fuller proposed—and then dropped the proposal—to relocate his charter school, the Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy (formerly the Milwaukee Collegiate Academy) into the open space at North Division.<sup>107</sup> The ultimate goal of the proposal was to combine the two schools into one larger school, under the same roof of North Division. While Fuller’s proposal had backing from then-superintendent of MPS, Darienne Driver, and school board members, he realized that his plan would cause opposition from the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association (MTEA). The MTEA secretary, Ingrid Walker-Henry, scathingly remarked that Milwaukee had “had more than enough of this 25-year private school experiment” in voucher and charter schools, like Fuller’s own collegiate academy.<sup>108</sup> While keeping Fuller’s name out of her comments, Walker-Henry made the MTEA position clear: a fight for a charter school, operated by a prominent supporter of vouchers and charters, would not be acceptable in a public school building. Fearing a lengthy conflict and not wanting to “pit...black people against black people,” Fuller backed off his proposal.<sup>109</sup>

Later in 2018, North Division underwent another reform, this time being designated as a “community school.”<sup>110</sup> The school would work in partnership with the Urban League and

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Due to North Division’s physical size, there were many open classrooms, enough for a second school to move into the building.

<sup>108</sup> Annysa Johnson, “Howard Fuller withdraws proposal to locate charter school at Milwaukee North Division.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), March 16, 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Annysa Johnson, “Urban League, United Way detail plans for Milwaukee’s troubled North Division High School.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), November 5, 2018.

United Way community organizations in an effort to increase college readiness and improve career services for students.<sup>111</sup> The focus of the Urban League’s role, according to president Eve Hall, would be to give “students and families...access to the resources and connections through the Urban League, including educational programs and job training” and create a “pipeline into STEM”; United Way stated similar goals and celebrated the opportunity to “put the organization’s equity work into practice.”<sup>112</sup> Along with the partnership with these community-based organizations, MPS proposed a “reimagining” of North Division, with new funding and a plan to turn the school into a “flagship school” to draw from surrounding elementary and middle schools.<sup>113</sup> Given the recency of these reforms and proposals, it is too early to make any conclusive statements about their efficacy. In the coming years, or even decades, it will be of great interest to look at the takeaways of these new plans. Whatever happens next, though, will have to be done with community input and community-oriented guidelines, if it is to be done well. The concerns of previous decades about community involvement and organization remain. As community leader and Northcott Neighborhood House director “Mac” Weddle put it, “we need to take back our community, and we need to take back our school...it’s time y’all. It’s time.”<sup>114</sup> Mr. Weddle’s plea echoes North Division’s activists of the past; we can hope that his hopes are fulfilled.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Annysa Johnson, “MPS unveils ambitious plan to transform education in one of Milwaukee’s poorest neighborhoods.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), August 11, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Annysa Johnson, “Howard Fuller emerges as central figure in battle over the future of MPS North Division High School.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), July 5, 2018.

### Looking forward

North Division is Milwaukee’s most prominent predominantly-Black high school. It is fair to argue that it is Milwaukee’s most prominent high school, period. The size of the school has always been impressive—enrollment once topped at over 2,000 students, and the building itself is sprawling, with almost 600,000 square feet of grounds—but the story is more important. From the dedicated leadership of the North community to the famous alums to the ever-present struggle for equity and student welfare, North Division’s story is rich, meaningful, and full of lessons. In many ways, the school is unique, based on its dramatic population shift, its size, its sheer number of protests, and its long list of accomplished alumnus. However, it is also representative of Milwaukee’s public schools.<sup>115</sup> Its relationship with integration, busing, funding, and community leadership is one that reflects issues, whether big or small, across many Milwaukee schools. North Division is bigger than education, though. In many ways, North Division’s story is Milwaukee’s story: a story of struggle, hope, and an incredible will to make life better.

The City of Milwaukee has not had the easiest years of its existence since the 1960s. This sixty-year period saw the African-American population boom—a shift that, much like at North Division, the city was unprepared, or possibly unwilling, to handle—and its industry fall. The

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<sup>115</sup> Milwaukee’s education story can even represent the experiences of public schools in the United States as a whole. The nation’s public school systems, especially those in major urban areas, underwent dramatic changes and faced countless protests after the *Brown v. Board* decision. They later dealt with many of the same concerns as MPS, such as busing, re-segregation, funding cuts, and the pressures of “No Child Left Behind,” just to name a few. The dynamics of race and segregation may be especially pronounced in Milwaukee, but they exist all across the county. For more on race and education reform in the post-*Brown* United States, see Manning Marable’s *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* and Russell Rickford’s *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. These, among many other works, gives a broader overview of the interplay of race, racism, and education in America.

timing of these separate events could not have been worse. For a Black population already facing heavy segregation in housing and education, the swift loss of industry during the 1960s and early 1970s was crippling. The high rates of African-American employment and family income plummeted with companies leaving for cheaper, non-union wages abroad.<sup>116</sup> Segregation in housing and schools actually increased over time, and the integration programs that were beginning to close the opportunity gap faded away.<sup>117</sup> Today, segregation and systemic racism in education is as bad as it has ever been, and racist lending practices mar the chances for Black Milwaukeeans to secure home loans; only *four percent* of all loans in the year 2016 went to African-Americans, even though they make up almost one fifth of the city's population. (Whites, by contrast, actually procured 81 percent of loans, even though they only constitute about 70 percent of the population.)<sup>118</sup> This means that, in practice, relocation and home ownership are extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Black Milwaukeeans to attain. There is a great deal of work to be done.

Milwaukee, however, is not a defeated city. Its communities are not broken, even if the systems that undergird their lives may be. Rather, it is a city that continues to fight from the ground up to better itself and better the lives of its residents. This begins and ends with

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<sup>116</sup> Ann-Elise Henzl, "History Helps Explain Connection Between Segregation and Concentrated Poverty in Milwaukee." *WUWM*, 8 March 2017, <https://www.wuwm.com/post/history-helps-explain-connection-between-segregation-and-concentrated-poverty-milwaukee#stream/0>  
 Michael Rosen and Jeffrey Sommers. "Michael Rosen and Jeffrey Sommers: To address African American poverty, Milwaukee must support union rights." *Madison.com*, 12 December 2019, [https://madison.com/ct/opinion/column/michael-rosen-and-jeffrey-sommers-to-address-african-american-poverty/article\\_ed35f907-6c47-51a7-9983-7ba154cd265c.html](https://madison.com/ct/opinion/column/michael-rosen-and-jeffrey-sommers-to-address-african-american-poverty/article_ed35f907-6c47-51a7-9983-7ba154cd265c.html)

<sup>117</sup> For more information on urban segregation in Milwaukee, see Kenya Downs' piece "Why is Milwaukee So Bad for Black People" and Barbara Miner's *Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic American City*, among many others.

<sup>118</sup> Ben Popken, "It's Not Easy to Borrow While Black in Milwaukee and Other Cities of Unrest." *NBC News*, 16 August 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/economy/it-s-not-easy-borrow-while-black-milwaukee-other-cities-n631021>

grassroots activists. The Milwaukee Public Schools likely would have saved themselves huge amounts of time and energy had they given more agency to community voices. From the integration debates to “Save North Division” and the “New North Division” school district proposal, the combined lack of district oversight and unwillingness to cede more power to community voices caused MPS a great deal of stress—which ultimately could have been avoided. Community organizations are helping fight for Milwaukeeans, just as they had done in the 1960s, and just as they will do in the future. Committed activists are still pushing for change, especially in the areas of education and housing. Black-owned businesses are fighting, pushing through a global pandemic and even opening new doors of food, retail, and culture. Milwaukee is surviving, with a great need for change but a strong presence of community activism ready to help make it.

The work does not end here, certainly; systemic racism is a plague, and our city, state, and nation should not—cannot—lose focus on equitable reforms. White Milwaukeeans, in particular, have an obligation to do what they can to make the city a better place for all of its residents. As many major cities are, Milwaukee is still coming to terms with its past and the painful truth that it—along with so many others—has let Black people down. It is important for white Milwaukeeans to recognize the numerous efforts made by the North Division community to welcome white students and families and facilitate positive integration. The large-scale, widespread efforts by Black-majority schools to recruit white families during the integration years combats prevailing notions of separatism and division, as do the “New North Division” district’s calls for white families to join. It was ultimately district oversight that was the source of concern, not hostility towards whites. Unfortunately, history tells a sad story of suburban

hostility towards many positive social movements, particularly open housing and integration.<sup>119</sup>

It is important to recognize this legacy, not simply to learn lessons of what not to do, but to hopefully mend fractured relationships and finally make a racially tolerant society a reality.

These are all concerns that will not disappear in a month, nor a year, nor perhaps a decade, but that doesn't make them any less worthy of undivided attention. These are the issues that will define Milwaukee, and our nation, in the near future. The concerns of Milwaukee as a city must also raise the question: what does this have to do with North Division? In a word: everything.

The most critical parts of the North Division story are the lessons learned along the way. These are lessons of grassroots power, of community organizing, of united protest and change. Most importantly, these are lessons that can carry us as a city into the future. North Division was, and is, an ever-changing space. From the integration debates in the 1960s to "Save North Division"; from the "New North Division School District" to the closing and reopening of the school; from Vel Phillips and Lloyd Barbee to Polly Williams and Howard to Shaniya Liberty and "Mac" Weddle; from generation to generation, it has been the will and commitment of grassroots activists that has played the biggest role in North Division's history. Although many other factors, including problems of district oversight, state and federal funding, and systemic racism, have affected the school, the most direct changes have always come from the direction of community leadership. The many different protests and periods at North Division were always undergirded by this strong sense of community obligation to the school, and the strong presence

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<sup>119</sup> Sadly, because there are such long histories of opposition to open housing and integration, there are many articles, books, and studies on these subjects. An interested reader can search for articles by several authors and researches, including Kenya Downs (segregated education), Richard V. Reeves and Edward Rodrigue (segregation and redlining), Leah Foltman and Malia Jones (redlining), Michelle Maternowski and Mitch Teich (segregation and bank practices), Michael Rosen and Jeffrey Sommers (disinvestment from public schooling), Ben Popken (racist lending practices), and many others.



of local leadership. These are the lessons that the City of Milwaukee must take into the future. Our future lies in our community. It is not outside directives that will save us; it is our own people. The future will come in many forms: it will be Black; it will be female; it will be progressive; it may even be radical; but no matter what, it will be local, and it will be Milwaukee. Regardless of the challenges North Division has faced, it has always had the strength and power of its community to face them. This is what we need to do in Milwaukee as a whole. As long as we can look at ourselves in the mirror, and look at our neighbors and community, we will have the power to change the city, and we'll be alright.

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