

A TALE OF TWO BOROUGHES

A SCHOOL INTEGRATION SUCCESS STORY



COIR

COMMISSION ON INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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FOREWORD

In the city of New York, with its great cosmopolitan population consisting of large numbers of people of every race, color, creed, national origin and ancestry, there is no greater danger to the health, morals, safety and welfare of the city, and its inhabitants than the existence of groups prejudiced against one another and antagonistic to each other because of differences of race, color, creed, national origin or ancestry.

Sometimes words are intended as window dressing. At other times they cut through to the heart of the matter. Such is the case with the excerpt at the top of this page. It comes from the policy statement issued when New York's City Council established the Commission on Intergroup Relations as an official city agency in 1955. And its wisdom has been demonstrated time and again since then.

This essay deals with one such instance. It sheds light on what we at COIR call the use of community relations techniques and programs to combat tensions, to create sound intergroup relations and facilitate the integration of such areas of living as schools, housing and community activities.

The action in this story centers on two boroughs in big, bustling New York. But the same elements are present in many places throughout our nation. Realize it or not—you, your child, or your community may be faced with a similar situation at almost any time. How will you deal with such problems? Perhaps better with this information at your disposal in charting a course of action.

It all began when New York's Board of Education announced in June, 1959, that some pupils would be transferred from overcrowded Brooklyn schools to Queens schools that happened to have 1,900 empty seats. So far, so good. But the Brooklyn schools were *de facto* segregated Bedford-Stuyvesant institutions. The others—in the Glendale and Ridgewood sections—were overwhelmingly white in population.

These are the ingredients in the tale told by Sidney Wallach, a consultant who prepared this report with the assistance of George F. Willison, former director of public information, and other members of the staff of the New York City Commission on Intergroup Relations. This, as you will see, is a story of rash charges, precipitous action, the rise of responsible community elements, a turning of the tide, and, finally, a successful conclusion.

We hope you will find it interesting and informative.

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FRANK S. HORNE
Executive Director

BACKGROUND

New York is a big city not only in its population and its pulsating human vitality, but also in its challenges and its problems. A major problem is meeting the educational needs of its million or more young people. The successful operation of its elementary schools and high schools, both public and private, presents a supreme challenge to the mind and the heart of the community—and to its skills and ingenuity as well.

The complexities of the challenge extend far beyond the traditional problems of sound pedagogy. One complexity arises from the constant movement and change in the city's many neighborhoods. This mobility is at once exciting—and demanding.

Every year sees marked changes in neighborhoods and in the districts in which the school system is organized.

Some areas become more heavily populated with many young families so that their youngsters crowd into neighborhood schools that must occasionally resort to double shifts in order to accommodate them. Other areas lose population or experience drastic alterations in the age level of residents so that fewer children go to schools built long ago for another kind of age group.

For years, the Board of Education followed the practice of assigning elementary and junior high school pupils to existing schools in the district and neighborhood in which the children lived. This had the important value of sound economic management. Besides, it was contended, the procedure contributed to neighborly intimacy and community pride.

But, others saw drawbacks in this practice.

A community that was exceptionally homogeneous missed the stimulating experience of having its youngsters mingle with others of the broad variety of New York's cosmopolitan population. The neighborhood and district school-limitation might develop a narrow parochialism. There was also the dismaying fact that as shifts in the age level or character of the school district's population took place, some schools had partially filled classrooms with many empty seats while just across the school district line, other schools were intolerably overcrowded, with pupils attending in two shifts.

It was not easy—it is not easy—to contend with this problem and to organize a fully satisfactory approach. There are no perfect answers. Adjustments and modifications are steadily called for, and can become effective if introduced patiently and with community understanding and cooperation. In due time, other problems develop—and the cycle continues.

But the objectives are clear: The school system must make it possible for the hundreds of thousands of New York's young school children to have an education worthy of their great city; it must make the best and most economical use of all of the schools' facilities; it must help draw together, in harmonious interplay, a growing generation as varied in its makeup as the world itself.

Because of rapid changes and new requirements, the Board of Education found that it had to modify its assignment procedures. One aspect of this necessary program was the step taken in June 1959, when the Board of Education announced a proposed transfer of pupils from overcrowded schools in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn and the Glendale and Ridgewood areas of Queens.

In making this announcement, Dr. John J. Theobald, Superintendent of Schools, stated that the transfer of third, fourth and fifth grade children was to enable them "to receive the full program of a five-hour day instead of the four hours of schooling they now receive in the overcrowded schools. . . . Not to do everything possible to provide an equal opportunity for these children would be a crime. . . . No community can afford to waste the human resources inherent in those boys and girls."

This, then, was a normal step in the complex school program of a city constantly undergoing change—and requiring constant adjustments. But, as it turned out, it was also one that, for a brief while, brought with it a threat of community strife and disruption and of the civic shame that comes from such outbursts.

At this point, New York City's Commission on Intergroup Relations began an action program, with the full cooperation of the Board of Education.

COIR was informed of the explosive possibilities from teachers in the neighborhood schools and other individuals in the communities. It had, moreover, a

direct invitation from the Board of Education to lend a hand.

As a first step, the Commission assigned members of its staff to go out into the field to assemble pertinent data and report back daily on what was going on. The Commission had to be on solid ground about the underlying facts so that it could deploy its "task force" effectively.

THE FACTS

COIR's staff observed and reported on four major aspects:

One was on the school and population situation that led to the Board of Education's ruling. Here were adjoining neighborhoods—Glendale-Ridgewood in the Borough of Queens and Bedford-Stuyvesant in the Borough of Brooklyn, with marked discrepancies in available classroom space and facilities.

Two of the Bedford-Stuyvesant schools from which transfers were to be made (P. S. 126 and P. S. 129) had 75 classrooms used by 117 classes, and there was a plain need for 42 additional classrooms to take care of the school needs of neighborhood children. The Glendale-Ridgewood schools (P. S. 68, 77, 88, and 91) had 149 classrooms of which only 79 were in use. Thus 70 classrooms were available for use by children in the heavily overcrowded Bedford-Stuyvesant schools in Brooklyn, just across the borough line.

Accordingly, as the permissive transfer process went on, 380 children of the third, fourth and fifth grades in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area were assigned to attend the under-used schools in the Glendale-Ridgewood area at the opening of school on September 14, 1959.

Added to the pressure for sheer growing-up space was another factor, the consensus of leading educators and social scientists regarding the beneficial effects of shared educational experience—experience with children of different races and cultures in our multi-racial and multi-religious society. Other observations

made by the COIR field staff shed a good deal of light on the situation in the communities themselves.

The Glendale-Ridgewood area comprised a low and middle income group, tightly knit, made up largely of second and third generation residents of white parentage with close family groupings and with a long-ingrained attitude of misgivings about and resistance to the "outsider."

The Bedford-Stuyvesant area was of another kind—heavily populated by families of low income, largely Negro and Puerto Rican—having the earmarks of a depressed area. But its children were as eager and as deserving of every educational opportunity as the youngsters of any other neighborhood.

Dominant in the Glendale-Ridgewood community was something intangible, the unuttered but pervasive fear of the "outsider." The *rationalizations*, however, were many and varied. There were complaints that to proceed with this program would disrupt the community and alter adversely its neighborhood character. Scare talk of an "innundation" by outsiders. Whispers about a decline in property values. Claims that the proposed transfer action would overcrowd the local schools. Predictions that the action would be followed by an outburst of juvenile delinquency.

These were the attitudes. As word of them spread, they evoked, in their turn, a pained and even angry reaction in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area. Protest meetings, with cries of wounded hurt and of anger followed.

In the Queens communities, the Glendale Taxpayers Association set out to raise funds to organize the people of the area in opposition to the proposed transfer action, and to enlist political and public support. On June 4, 1959, occurred the first of a series of public meetings under the auspices of this Association, at which a number of leading citizens spoke.

Three weeks later, another protest meeting was held. Later, a court action was instituted to halt the transfer. When the action failed, a series of demonstrations were launched to picket City Hall and to enlist support from others.

But this was only one side of the story. There were also, it became clear as the COIR staff met with the people in the area, healthy forces in the community:

people appalled by manifestations of intolerance and by the tactics of some groups with vested interests. The churches were deeply concerned over living by their spiritual concept of the brotherhood of man. Social service groups, civic groups, and youth organizations felt a sense of shame—and were ready to do something about it. Merchants were troubled by the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. And many prominent individuals would not permit themselves or their community to be tarred with the ugly brush of racial hatred and discrimination.

THE ACTION STAFF

It was COIR's task to marshal these forces, to bring about compliance with the official ruling, and to do so by arousing a wholesome spirit of understanding and civic decency. The goal was to effect an understanding by the people themselves—an understanding of the issues involved and, with it, an evocation of their own highest civic and moral impulses.

A trained Commission task force of six members worked on this problem day and night, with help provided by the full administrative and counselling resources of the Commission. One staff member was assigned to work with the Protestant ministers. Another field worker enlisted the cooperation of the parents and interested leaders in the Bedford-Stuyvesant community. A third staff specialist acted as liaison to the Board of Education and Police Department. A fourth was given the job of reaching and influencing the complaining groups. Still another staff member was directed to inform, and utilize the resources of private intergroup agencies, an especially significant task.

One major assignment was to marshal the constructive Catholic forces in the predominantly Catholic community of Glendale-Ridgewood.

Each task force member reported regularly to Commission headquarters and to Dr. Frank S. Horne, executive director. All activities were coordinated into an effective program that was to end,

three months later, in the peaceful acceptance of the transferred children.

A major requirement was to keep informed of the sentiments and plans of the Glendale Taxpayers Association which headed resistance to the announced program. Their officers were immediately contacted. Their protest meetings were attended and fully reported to the Commission. Individual leaders were visited. Persistent efforts were made to have them recognize the danger and folly of their course of action and the lack of substance to their fears.

In a parallel effort, the Bedford-Stuyvesant groups were approached, and conferences held with them to make sure that there would be no aggressive or inflammatory action on their part.

Wherever there was occasion for it, the Commission issued a clarifying statement:

In one, Dr. Horne said, "The City of New York cannot permit pressure or agitation to deflect it from proceeding with the orderly rezoning of its schools to secure the best possible education for everyone of our children."

This statement summed up the conclusions of a meeting of twenty-four religious and civic leaders at his office, convened to put their full strength behind the COIR action program. Among the organizations represented at this meeting were the Protestant Council of New York, the American Jewish Congress, the Catholic Interracial Council, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the NAACP, the Urban League of Greater New York, the United Parents Association, the American Jewish Committee, the Brooklyn Catholic Interracial Council, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the New York East Methodist Conference, the Council of Spanish-American Organizations, and the Jewish Labor Committee. Representatives of the Board of Education and City Youth Board also were present.

The representatives at the meeting unanimously urged the Board of Education to carry out its transfer plan. They went further and called on the Board to improve its community relations program in order to spread a wider understanding of this and of other rezoning actions that might be undertaken later. Most important, they pledged themselves to enlist full support for the transfer plan from the members of their own constituent groups in the areas involved.

A subsequent letter from the Commission's Executive Director to the New York *World Telegram and Sun* made COIR's position clear:

"The Commission is concerned," wrote Dr. Horne, "with effective implementation of the policy adopted by the Board of Education in 1954 which declared that 'racially homogenous schools are educationally undesirable' and stated that the Board would 'put into operation a plan which will prevent further development of such schools and would integrate existing ones as quickly as possible.'"

"The Board of Education," the letter continued, "has clearly recognized, along with the United States Supreme Court, that segregated education is in itself bad education, and that among its educational goals the objective of integration shall be a cardinal principle."

"This does not mean criss-crossing bus routes all over the town. It does mean, as the Board has stated, that integration shall be effected 'to the fullest extent possible' in establishing district zoning lines, in selection of sites for new schools, and in transferring students from under-utilized schools to over-utilized schools. It does mean serious re-examination of the concept of the neighborhood school in a city whose neighborhoods have changed drastically."

"There are many tools which can and must be used to provide equal educational opportunities for all the city's children. The Board of Education has soundly stated that toward this goal it 'considers the city's school district as an entity and not a division into boroughs.' We cannot consider this to be 'artificial integration,' for it is in fact the only way to achieve an education which will give New York City's children full benefits and prepare them for their responsibilities as citizens of a democracy which seeks to lead the world community."

In this position, Dr. Horne and the Commission were warmly supported when the *New York Times*, in an editorial on "Schools and Borough Lines," said, "There is nothing sacred about the borough line dividing Queens and Brooklyn. This is one city. After all, the argument against segregation in the public schools was that it made for unequal educational opportunity, and there is no place for that in New York City's schools."

Meanwhile, the task force proceeded. There were discussions with the Bedford-Stuyvesant representatives of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and with Parents-Teachers Associations in both neighborhoods. Religious leaders

within the community and from larger city organizations were approached and their help enlisted. The community newspaper was given the facts, as were interested organizations and all of the city media—press, radio, and television.

The principals of the five receiving schools were interviewed and an orderly procedure set up for the welcome of the transfer students. So rapidly did this task force advance that by mid-June, a special meeting of representatives of city and borough agencies and organizations, and of representative individuals from the affected communities, noted progress and began to develop further plans.

There was no letdown in this concerted effort to stimulate community understanding and civic responsibility.

A borough-wide meeting of Queens NAACP officers adopted helpful resolutions. Local Protestant and Catholic churches were encouraged to give a series of sermons stressing the religious imperative for peaceable and good neighborly action. Youth workers were enlisted. Speakers were sent to church and other groups. Individual families were visited by their pastors and priests. Wide distribution was given to statements by the Brooklyn and Queens Catholic Interracial Council, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League and other representative Jewish bodies. An impressive "Declaration of Conscience" was drawn up by a group of nineteen Protestant ministers and a rabbi of the Glendale-Ridgewood neighborhood. And approaches were made for a joint program by the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance.

A strong effort was made by the Roman Catholic church groups since the affected communities in Queens were overwhelmingly of families of that faith.

The Brooklyn and Queens Catholic Interracial Councils issued positive statements supporting the transfer of the Negro children, as did the Brooklyn-Queens Federation of the Young Christian Workers and the Brooklyn-Queens Federation of the Christian Family Movement.

A coordinated approach was quickly devised and carried out. A fact sheet on the situation was designed and 5,000 copies were rapidly distributed in bars, beauty parlors, candy stores, barber shops,

buses, supermarkets, and other gathering places. The Queens and Brooklyn Catholic Interracial Councils assisted the local social action groups by paying for the printing of the fact sheet. The Catholic Interracial Council of New York provided hundreds of copies of the Bishops' statement on "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience" and other printed matter interpreting the Catholic position on race relations.

In all of this, in close cooperation with the Board of Education and with the other official and voluntary agencies, there was an enlistment of city-wide support, so effective as to leave an unforgettable impression on the residents of the two neighborhoods.

By the end of the summer, the hostile agitation was dying out. The clamorous group that had organized to oppose the school transfer saw its ranks diminished. Court action had failed. The original appeal to gain public support for their resistance to the transfer of the Bedford-Stuyvesant children had aroused the very opposite—a concerted demonstration by the entire city in support of an irresistible trend toward true democratic living, a marshaling of all of the decent forces to counteract any action that had as its seed-bed hostility to any sector of the city's population. COIR had worked toward this goal and was steadily attaining it. By mid-July, Dr. Horne could announce publicly:

"There is a genuine desire by reasonable people from both communities to cooperate in assuring a peaceable transfer and welcome for these children."

Some weeks later, he went further in saying:

"We now have firm ground to report that civic and church leaders in the Glendale-Ridgewood area will see to it that the transfer of 364 pupils from nearby overcrowded Brooklyn schools will take place smoothly, and in a way that will be a credit to any good American community."

There was still the final task—the actual enrollment of the transferred children and their smooth inclusion into the orderly processes of the schools to which they had been assigned.

Careful arrangements, in which COIR played a responsible part, were made to cover every contingency. There were full but unobtrusive provisions for police protection. But there was more. The principals and the teachers were well prepared—as were

the entering pupils. Parents were on the alert. Community leaders were ready to exert their most effective influence.

And on September 14th, the new school term began—as planned.

For a few days, murmurings remained. Die-hards whose bigotry was unaffected by the massive outpouring of goodwill went on to agitate in a last ditch effort for a boycott of the schools by the local parents and students. The effort was started, continued for a few days—and fizzled out. The program was soon in full normal operation.

The best instincts of the community had won out.

No single action can be credited with producing this gratifying, happy ending. The outcome could be foreseen, once there was full enlistment of the inherently decent impulses of the peoples in the communities, and of New Yorkers in general.

It had been COIR's job to make sure of that effective joining of forces.

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