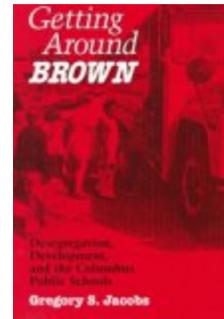


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gregory S. Jacobs. *Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development and the Columbus Public Schools*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1998. xvi + 291 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0721-5.

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Busing. Perhaps no word in the 1970s carried as much baggage and as many assumptions as this one seemingly simple word. To white and black liberals busing meant the realization of the dream of equal opportunity. To many working-class whites busing meant the intrusion of both the government and young blacks into their neighborhoods. To many working- and lower-class blacks busing offered both the hope of expanded educational opportunities as well as the threat of encounters with the hostile white majority. For urban leaders busing meant the intervention of the national government into local matters, the possibility of increased racial conflict, and the potential of white flight, declining property values, and a loss of tax revenues. In the late 1990s, however, there is an almost universal agreement about the meaning of busing. It has become a shorthand for the failure of the liberal social policies of the 1960s and 1970s. Critics argue that educational desegregation in Northern cities was doomed from the beginning as an ill-conceived attempt at social engineering.

In *Getting Around Brown*, Gregory Jacobs challenges the current belief that school desegregation was doomed from the beginning, by examining how the various 1970s visions of busing unfolded in Columbus, Ohio. Jacobs finds that by the mid 1980s the Columbus school district had recovered from the shock of the 1979 implementation of a court-ordered desegregation plan and was enjoying a resurgence. Not only had the district avoided the type of racial conflict that characterized desegregation in Boston and Louisville, it also had by 1986 financial stability, rising SAT scores, a number of creative programs, fine schools, and an integrated student body. But this resurgence, as Jacobs cogently argues, was cut short by a series of deals worked out by city officials, business lead-

ers, suburban school districts, and real estate developers over issues of annexation.

Unlike most large, northern cities, the city of Columbus is not hemmed in by a ring of suburbs. The city used its water and sewer monopolies to aggressively annex undeveloped land on the city's fringes which, according to Jacobs, enabled the city to escape many of the urban problems associated with a declining tax base as development moves away from the center city. Until the 1970s schools and children in the annexed areas were usually absorbed into the Columbus school system, but the threat of desegregation put an end to this practice. Suburban parents fearful of sending their children to racially and economically diverse schools and suburban school districts fearful of a loss of students and tax revenues insisted that newly-annexed areas remain in the suburban school districts and in 1980 were able to secure the first of what would be three two-year state moratoriums on the transfer of land and students to the Columbus school district.

As Jacobs points out, the last of these moratoriums expired at the same time the Columbus school district was enjoying a resurgence. The expiration of the moratorium and the unwillingness of the General Assembly to pass another one forced city officials, Columbus school officials, and suburban school officials to come to an agreement concerning both the fate of over 15,000 school children who lived in Columbus city limits, yet attended suburban schools and how future annexations would be handled. In need of both the 15,000 mostly middle class students and the tax revenue contained in the areas of Columbus not part of the school system, Columbus school officials brought little leverage to the negoti-

ating table. In the end the Columbus schools settled for an agreement dubbed “win-win” that kept the existing district boundaries intact, but required that land annexed into the city of Columbus in the future be transferred into the Columbus school district. While critical of the agreement, Jacobs suggests that “win-win” offered a modicum of hope for the school district. As long as the city continued its aggressive annexation policy, the school district would gain both greater revenue and the additional white and middle-class students needed to diversify and improve the system.

The problem, according to Jacobs, was that soon after “win-win” the city of Columbus abrogated the agreement by annexing land and allowing the students to remain in the suburban school system. By allowing a huge residential development by Les Wexner, the billionaire founder of the Limited clothing empire, to receive Columbus water and sewer services while remaining in a suburban school district, the political and business leaders of Columbus, according to Jacobs, signaled their intention to sacrifice the long term health of the Columbus school district in order to allow the continued expansion of the city. Decisions circumventing win-win have allowed 40% of the city of Columbus to be served by suburban school districts. Jacobs concludes, “desegregation failed to ensure equal educational opportunity not because it was inherently detrimental to learning, but because it was intrinsically incompatible with new residential real estate development” (p. 121).

While extremely persuasive and well argued, *Getting Around Brown* is not without flaws. The most glaring of which is Jacobs’s “modest proposal” in the book’s conclusion for the future of Columbus schools in which he calls

for the destruction of the Columbus Public School System, the absorption of Columbus’s increasingly black and poor students into the more white and affluent suburban school systems, and the creation of a special district within the old school district boundaries offering experimental programs and magnet schools serving the whole county. As Jacob’s discussions throughout the book make clear, these solutions are unworkable. The creation of an increasingly Black and poor Columbus school district has given Black leaders and parents a greater voice over the future of their schools, and they are not about to abdicate that responsibility to a larger white community which has betrayed them in the past. Led by school board member Bill Moss, these Black leaders are deeply suspicious of any effort which could undermine Black influence over the city’s schools. Additionally, the white, affluent suburban school systems which vociferously opposed annexation into the Columbus district and the desegregation which that entailed, will not welcome the mostly Black and lower income Columbus students into their districts.

Despite the unworkability of Jacobs’s “modest proposal,” the book has much to offer those interested in Ohio history, urban history, race relations, public policy history, and the future of public education on American. Using over sixty personal interviews and drawing on the appropriate archival sources, Jacobs has created an outstanding work.

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