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Statement of the United States Commission on Civil Rights
Concerning the President's Message to Congress
and Proposed Legislation on Busing and
Equal Educational Opportunities

On March 17, 1972, the President sent to Congress a message and proposed legislation dealing with the most deeply felt and most divisive domestic issue troubling the American people today. The issue is commonly characterized as "busing," but it involves far more fundamental questions. It involves questions concerning the kind of education we want our children to have, the firmness of our resolve to redeem the Nation's pledge of equal rights for all, and, in the final analysis, the kind of society we want our children to inherit.

The President has spoken out at length and has introduced detailed legislation on the issue. Although the Commission has serious disagreement with the President's premises and recommendations for legislation, we believe that it is not only right and proper, but essential, for the President to address this issue. The Commission is mandated by law to advise both the President and the Congress on these matters, and we speak out with the hope that we may contribute to constructive debate and to successful resolution of the difficult problems involved.

What has divided the Nation on school busing is not so much sharp disagreement on the merits, but confusion as to what the issues really are. Public discussion has not served to illuminate these issues. The

complex matter of overcoming in a few years the inequities of the long past through the medium of desegregated schools has been reduced to the question of whether one is for or against busing.

In his message, the President has recognized the need to address these important issues rationally and analytically. In addition, the President has sought to quiet the fear that his legislation placing curbs on busing will mark an end to the effort to achieve equal rights and even undo the advances made in the 18 years since the Supreme Court of the United States declared that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Despite the President's assurances, we fear that this legislation will nonetheless have that result. It focuses on the wrong issue--busing--and in so doing will make rational debate over the true issues of school desegregation and quality education much more difficult. Further, if enacted, it would mark a major governmental retreat in the area that has been at the heart of the struggle for equal rights. Retreats in other areas might well follow.

In its fifteen-year history, the Commission has been continuously studying the problems of achieving quality, desegregated education. We have issued numerous reports dealing with various aspects of the problem North and South, and exploring ways in which it can be successfully resolved. We issue this statement out of our present concern that progress in school desegregation not be halted and not be diluted.

Legal Background

In 1954, the Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka established that officially sanctioned segregation in public schools violates the 14th Amendment. Most clearly this holding applied to those States in which segregation was expressly required or authorized by law. In recent years, this principle of law has been applied as well to Northern school districts where the courts have concluded that official policies and actions have just as effectively resulted in racial isolation in the schools.

In the 18 years since Brown, not only have the courts continued to interpret what constitutes illegal segregation, but the courts and other agencies of government have been seeking to devise effective remedies for achieving full school integration.

Throughout the late 1950's and 1960's, many school districts adopted a variety of plans which produced little integration--in fact, less than 3 percent in 10 years. In 1968, the Supreme Court made clear that Brown requires the actual abolition of dual school systems--so that there no longer are "white schools" or "black schools," but simply schools.

The loss of time, the loss of opportunity for a generation of our children has been discouraging. But remedies have been developed. A variety of techniques for achieving desegregation have been applied successfully, including the use of attendance zones, pairing of schools, construction of new facilities, such as education parks, and, ~~always~~ as a last resort, busing.

The appropriateness of these remedies was fully dealt with last April by the Supreme Court in Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg. In that case, the Court recognized the validity and necessity of each of these remedies--including busing--which courts, with the guidance of Federal, State and local officials, had concluded were the proper means for achieving desegregation and fulfilling the promise of the Brown decision.

It is against the background of this history that the legislation proposed by the President must be viewed.

Curb on the Courts

As the President points out, all three branches of the Federal Government have participated in the effort to end the system of State-imposed segregation in the public schools. As he also points out, however, they have been unequal partners. The courts have carried the heaviest share of the burden. During the ten years following the 1954 Brown decision, the courts labored virtually alone with little if any backing from the executive and legislative branches. The pace of desegregation was painfully slow, in contrast to the court's injunction of "all deliberate speed."

It was not until a decade later that Congress, through enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Executive Branch, through enforcement of Title VI of that law, joined the battle. In recent years the courts again have had to carry the main burden, but the dramatic increase in the pace of desegregation since 1964 demonstrates the impact that all three branches, working together, can have.

The disproportionate burden placed upon the courts has been unfair. Further, the case-by-case approach, which is inherent in the judicial process, is not the most effective way to deal with a problem of national scope and concern. The limited range of remedies available to courts further limits their capacity to meet the problem. Congress, with its power to enact new programs and to appropriate funds, and the Executive Branch, with its power of flexible administration, are necessary partners. Thus we agree with the President when he urges that Congress accept additional responsibility and use its authority under the 14th Amendment for purposes of joining the effort to desegregate the schools.

The courts need support and assistance. However, the legislation proposed by the President would curb, not help, them. It would seek to limit the remedies available to the courts by restricting and, in some cases, removing, their power to order transportation of students. It would also blunt the force of the Executive Branch through similar restrictions. The proposed "Student Transportation Moratorium Act of 1972" would bar, until July 1, 1973 or until appropriate legislation is enacted by Congress, all new busing orders, despite the unmistakably clear and strong mandate of the Supreme Court that further delay in carrying out the requirements of Brown is not acceptable. As the Court has said:

> The burden on a school board today is to come forth with a plan that promises realistically to work, and promises realistically to work now.

The proposed "Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1972" also would place severe curbs on the power of the courts and the Executive Branch to remedy constitutional violations. It would generally prohibit the ordering of desegregation plans that involve an increase in the amount of transportation. For elementary school students, this prohibition would be absolute. It should be stressed that this anti-busing proposal, unlike the one in the "Moratorium" bill, would be permanent. Thus the power of Federal Courts to provide relief to those whose constitutional rights have been violated would be impaired--indefinitely. Further, existing court orders or desegregation plans under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 could be reopened and changed.

The legislation also would seek to alter the standard by which courts judge constitutional rights and remedies. Provisions of the bill, such as those emphasizing the appropriateness of neighborhood school assignment and the inviolability of school district lines, would not only impair the courts' power to provide remedies, but also, by seeking to lower the standard of constitutionality, would intrude on the traditional prerogative of the courts. Thus this proposed legislation raises serious constitutional questions concerning separation of powers.

The Commission urges that Congress fully examine these questions, especially those concerning constitutionality, before acting. The courts are the final judges on issues of constitutionality, but Congress has its own heavy responsibility to assure that legislation it enacts is authorized under the Constitution. The Commission believes

that the anti-busing provisions in this legislation not only would impede desegregation efforts, but would also undermine the integrity of our Federal judiciary.

Ours is the longest enduring Constitution in the world today precisely because the founding fathers wisely balanced the powers to preserve constitutional and equal rights for all citizens. To tamper with this balance is a threat to the Nation and its future life and health which far transcends the issue of busing.

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Busing and Neighborhood Schools

What Americans must keep in mind, in the furor over the busing debate, is that to restrict busing in most communities is simply to restrict desegregation. This is so because of the segregated neighborhoods that exist from coast to coast, North and South. It is so because even with a concerted effort to eliminate well-entrenched patterns of housing segregation, it would take generations to undo or even significantly alter them and thus to alter the educational opportunity of the children who live in segregated neighborhoods near inferior, segregated neighborhood schools. What you really say to these children when you say "no busing" is "stay in your place and attend your inferior schools." This will, in reality, cost us another whole generation of badly educated minority children, denied their constitutional rights to equal educational opportunity. No amount of talk about new expenditures to create what, in fact, is a reversion to the unconstitutional and bankrupt policy of "separate but equal" will long delude minority parents or even minority students.

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This is not to say, however, that busing is the only means of achieving desegregation. In many towns and cities, busing is not necessary and desegregation can be achieved within the confines of neighborhood school attendance. Great progress can be made [redacted] through the use of such techniques as redrawing school attendance lines, pairing schools, and creating central schools.

But in many cases these techniques, no matter how skillfully and conscientiously applied, cannot bring about desegregation without busing. That is because very often school attendance areas must be enlarged in order to accomplish desegregation, and some pupils would be too far away from school to walk. In these instances, some pupils have to be transported to school. Sincere and dedicated school officials, school boards and courts across the Nation have sought ways to desegregate schools in a number of cities without busing and have had to conclude, finally, that in some cases there is no other way.

To be sure, busing for desegregation purposes can be inconvenient--but no more so than busing for a number of other educational purposes. The key question is the value we place--for the sake of our children and our society--upon having quality, integrated education. The Commission is convinced that the relatively small amount of busing that is conducted for desegregation purposes is not only justified, but is necessary. The Supreme Court recognized this fact in the Swann case.

The Supreme Court, in Swann, did not ignore the worries of parents about "excessive" busing. The Court said that children should not be bused if the time or distance would endanger either the child's health or education, and that seems a reasonable standard to this Commission. Noone is endorsing the busing of any child to an inferior school, although just this happened to many past generations of minority children. The fears and concerns about busing, and the extent and inconvenience of it, have been greatly overstated in the course of the debate now sweeping the Nation. Regretfully, too many leaders have been speaking to the base prejudices of the American people rather than to their inherent sense of justice and idealism.

What are the plain facts about busing? Every day nearly 20 million school children go to and from school by bus and their parents seldom complain about inconvenience. Some parents prefer to have their children go to school by bus rather than brave dangerous traffic on foot. Some school boards provide buses for handicapped and gifted children, so that they can attend special schools away from their neighborhoods. Rural areas have virtually abandoned the once-familiar one-room school in favor of modern consolidated schools reached by bus. School districts often take pride in providing transportation for these purposes, sometimes at great cost, knowing that the improved education that awaits the children at the end of the bus ride is what really matters and this is well worth the inconvenience. Only when busing occurs for the purpose of desegregation are objections

raised. Some would have us believe that for this purpose, busing is not an inconvenience, but an absolute evil.

The neighborhood school represents, in a sense, the opposite side of the coin of busing. That is, just as the fifty-year old practice of busing represents an inconvenience, not an absolute evil, neighborhood schools represent a convenience, not an absolute good.

As noted, neighborhood schools have been abandoned by the thousands in rural areas in favor of larger consolidated schools commonly reached by bus. The trend of modern educational thought generally is away from the neighborhood school and toward the larger central units that can provide facilities, teachers, services and curriculum not financially feasible in smaller neighborhood schools.

START

Neighborhood schools realistically should be viewed as only one of several forms of school units, and not as the foundation upon which our entire system of public education should rest. In plain fact, it does not. Therefore it would be a serious mistake for the proposed "Equal Education Opportunities Act" to elevate the neighborhood school concept to the position of a new national policy and purpose. To do so would not only undermine desegregation; it would discourage the efforts of educators seeking to improve the organization of their school system toward providing quality education for every pupil.

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Integration and Equal Educational Opportunity

The cornerstone of the proposed "Equal Educational Opportunities Act" is the declaration of national policy that:

> all children enrolled in public schools are entitled to equal education opportunity, without regard to race, color, and national origin.

The substantive provisions of the bill, however, seek to carry out this policy while at the same time curtailing efforts to desegregate the schools. Indeed the President's message, as well as the legislation, accept the inevitability of continued school segregation and seek other means--the channelling of money into ghetto schools--to achieve equality of educational opportunity.

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The essence of the President's proposal is that infusion of money can make racially isolated schools equal and he would allocate up to $2.5 billion in previously requested funds to this purpose. The Commission doubts the value of this approach. In fact, it has not worked even with a larger per student allotment in the schools of Washington, D. C.

In seeking to achieve equal educational opportunity by equalizing segregated facilities, the legislation returns to the tradition of the discarded "separate but equal" rule of Plessy v. Ferguson, which the Brown decision expressly overturned as unconstitutional.

But even if true equality could be achieved under segregated conditions, there is little reason to believe that the expenditures

over

report prepared by Mosteller and Moynihan of Harvard

contemplated would accomplish this result. A recent [redacted] has reaffirmed that the least promising way to improve education in ghetto schools is through the expenditure of additional funds. Many studies, including the Commission's own, have concluded that amounts far in excess of those presently contemplated would be necessary before compensatory programs in ghetto schools would in fact "compensate" in any significant degree. STOP

Is pupil integration any more likely than increased expenditures to achieve our goals? A basic finding of the 1966 Office of Education study, "Equality of Educational Opportunity," (the Coleman Report) was that a child's own family background was by far the most important influence on his school achievement and later life experience. Some have concluded from this finding that the schools are virtually powerless as a positive influence on our children, and that the effort, instead, must be in the area of jobs and income.

We believe there are severe fallacies in this reasoning. First, the reasoning assumes incorrectly that there is only one road to the achievement of equality for minorities. In fact, efforts must be made across the board--in jobs, in housing, and in education--if that goal is to be realized. Experience has taught us that none can be ignored, that there is no quick or simple cure to the social and economic injustices which have been allowed to grow and fester for decades.

Second, this reasoning would lead us to write off at least one more generation of children, knowingly abandoning efforts to help them develop into productive participants in American society and condeming them to lives of inequality.

Third, the conclusion that the schools are powerless to increase and improve their impact on the young is wrong. As the Office of Education study found, as the Commission on Civil Rights' own study, "Racial Isolation in the Public Schools," later confirmed, and as the Harvard University report recently has reaffirmed, the social and economic backgrounds of a child's classmates bear very significantly on his or her achievement in school. It therefore does matter greatly that disadvantaged children not be educated in isolation.

But schools play a much more important function than merely providing children with the technical tools necessary to perform well on achievement tests. It is a function which one commentator has described as "to prepare people not just to earn a living but also to live a life--a creative, humane, and sensitive life." In short, the true measure of how well schools are performing cannot be gained solely by reference to test results. Two years ago, the President underscored the uniqueness of the school as an institution of society:

> It is a place not only of learning but also of living--where a child's friendships center, where he learns to measure himself against others, to share, to compete, to cooperate --.

It should also [redacted] be a place where a child is not isolated in inferior surroundings as part of an unwanted class or race and thus told from the beginning of the process that he is inferior.

The school is the most important public institution bearing on a child's development as an informed, educated person and as a human being with hope for the future. It represents the single most important opportunity afforded to society to interrupt the endless cycle of poverty and, above all, to heal the great social divisions that trouble the Nation. For children of white, affluent society, as well as for minorities, integrated education is essential if they are to thrive in the multi-racial world they will enter and help redeem America's promise, which school children each day are asked to recite and believe in--"One Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." The Commission believes it would be a serious mistake for Congress to enact legislation--especially legislation entitled "Equal Educational Opportunities Act"--that accepts the inevitability of school segregation, with its demonstrated denial of equal educational opportunity.

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Conclusion

The basic cause of the Commission's deep concern over the President's legislation is that it can have no other effect than to roll back the desegregation advances made so slowly and so painfully over the 18 years since the Supreme Court of the United States declared that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." This proposed legislation is retrogessive on several counts:

-- It seeks to alter the substantive standards by which the illegality of school segregation could or should be judged and found wanting.

-- It seeks to hinder the capacity of the courts to provide relief to those whose constitutional right to a desegregated education has been violated.

-- It seeks to curb the Executive Branch as an active participant in the effort to desegregate the schools.

-- It seeks to enshrine the neighborhood school as a fundamental cornerstone of educational policy when, in light of pervasive patterns of neighborhood segregation, this can only have the effect of perpetuating segregated schools.

-- It would accept the inevitability of the continuation of school segregation and seek to create equal educational opportunity by equalizing racially separate schools, in other words, a reversion to the doctrine and practice of "separate but equal". STOP

These and other provisions in the legislation would render lifeless many of the legal principles established in the Supreme Court's classic Brown decision.

Two years ago, the President emphasized the close tie between quality education and desegregation: "Quality is what education is all about; desegregation is vital to that quality."

In that statement the President took a position with which we concurred then and concur now. It is a stand that is just as correct and essential today as it was two years ago. It is a stand

from which the President, Congress, American education and the Nation should not retreat.

In a broader sense the Commission has even graver reservations as to the impact of such legislation.

Since the Supreme Court decision in the Gaines case in 1937, requiring the admission of a black man to the law school of the University of Missouri, there has been a slow but steady and progressive attack on segregation and discrimination in this Nation. Executive Orders of Presidents beginning in 1941, acts of Congress beginning in 1957, along with other decisions of the courts, have all been directed toward the creation of legally supported standards of behavior that would lead the Nation toward human cohesiveness and racial equality.

Now for the first time in 35 years we are faced with a [redacted] series of legislative proposals including an amendment to the Constitution that lead us back along a road that this Nation should never see again. These proposals require the nation to turn its face [redacted] away from finding solutions to the difficult task of seeking effective ways of implementing the decisions of the courts and the civil rights laws enacted by the Congress. We must now defend the results of 30 years of effort that we thought were fast becoming an accepted part of American manners and morals.

Our fear is that what appears to be an assault on school desegregation, will in fact have the effect of providing solace, comfort,

and support to those who opposed all civil rights advances in the past and who may now attempt to roll back the progress made in other areas.

We are also greatly troubled that millions of American citizens of minority group background may well conclude that the laws and court decisions that had begun to generate hope and faith in America's commitment to a desegregated society, with equality and justice for all, was never a true commitment, but only a device designed to muffle the voices of discontent and frustration.

Any legislation that deprives or makes more difficult the process by which American children of all races learn to understand each other--through the kind of creative contacts that can take place in the schools of the Nation--is, in our view, antithetical to the creation of a society with the capacity to provide equal justice to all, and lessens the hope, not only for American education but for American children and our Nation.