CHALLENGING PUBLIC SCHOOL RESEGREGATION:
THE USE OF SMALL-SCALE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
TO PRESERVE THE PROMISE OF BROWN

A Thesis in
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by
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of small-scale social movements to resist current trends toward public school resegregation. Specifically, this research examined the process which took place within one community as they sought to respond to a neighborhood schools law after the termination of their long-standing desegregation plan. Utilizing participant interviews with parents, educators and community leaders, the study identifies the conditions under which it is possible to engender wide spread community support for the continuation of a student assignment plan that maintains racial and economic diversity within schools throughout the district. Several themes emerged from the study which explain why local residents either favored or opposed neighborhood schools; and specifically how their level of activism contributed to the community’s ability to maintain their current system of busing. Results indicate that for those who opposed neighborhood schools, primary concerns centered on issues of equity and opportunities for diversity, while neighborhood school supporters emphasized community building and increased levels of parental involvement. Additionally, the combination of visionary leadership, strategically developed coalitions, and the engagement of residents’ collective sense of responsibility led to increased levels of community empowerment and activism. Results from this study should be useful to other school districts facing similar challenges to their current desegregation plans.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Canton School District\(^1\) is a small idyllic looking community located within a mid-size metropolitan city along the eastern seaboard. Dozens of picturesque little neighborhoods greet visitors as they drive through portions of this community, a community that seems almost perfect at first glance. Less than ten minutes later however, visitors are confronted with a very different picture. By contrast, the remaining neighborhoods within the district offer none of the pleasantries described above, instead giving way to urban neighborhoods clearly steeped in poverty. It is this contrast that is at the heart of this story and that also places the Canton School District in the center of current desegregation policy debates. At a time when current trends toward public school resegregation dominate these debates, the events that took place within this district offer a rare opportunity to carefully examine how communities respond to such trends. The ability to maintain current levels of racial and economic diversity within a school district and the process of how school districts respond to such challenges is worth further exploration.

Confronted with the 1995 termination of their long-standing desegregation plan and the passage of a 2000 neighborhood schools law that mandated that every student attend the school closest to their home, the Canton School District successfully prevented a return to neighborhood schools. The current research qualitatively examines Canton’s response to these legal decisions, specifically asking: 1) Why the Canton community was motivated to

\(^{1}\) Names used for cities, school districts, and neighborhoods are pseudonyms, as local authorities did not wish to have the community identified.
challenge neighborhood schools and 2) How they became mobilized to do so. The answers
to these questions will provide readers with a unique look into this community, to determine
what conditions are necessary to generate widespread support for the continuation of student
assignment plans which maintain a district’s racial and economic diversity in light of national
and local efforts which would alter that.

It has been fifty years since the Supreme Court ruled that there was no place for
separate but equal in public education. In the 1954 landmark *Brown vs. The Board of
Education* case, the Justices unanimously ruled that the legal segregation of Blacks from
Whites in public education was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th
Amendment of the U.S. Constitution in that it resulted in irreparable harm to Black students,
severely limiting their educational and occupational mobility. As a result of that historic
decision, we witnessed the implementation of both mandatory and voluntary desegregation
plans in school districts across the country.

Despite the fact that the decades following *Brown* were marked initially by a
narrowing of the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites as well as by declines in racial
segregation in the public schools (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Garibaldi, 1998;
Rivkin, 1999), we have yet to achieve the promise of *Brown*. By the early 1990s,
desegregation policies in the United States began to come under attack and by all accounts,
these policies are rapidly coming to a halt (Clotfelter, 2004; Kahlenberg, 1999; Orfield, 2001;
Yun & Reardon, 2002). Today, many of our public schools remain largely segregated by
race and class while school districts are being forced to deal with the complexities of trying
to reconcile the past with the present and future politics of race and class within public
education. The Canton School District is one such example.
Revisiting Brown

Prior to 1954, seventeen states in the southern region of the U.S. operated a segregated system of public schooling (Kluger, 1976), as was the case for other aspects of public life as well. Under Jim Crow laws, Blacks were prohibited from utilizing the same parks, libraries, restaurants, theatres, and modes of transportation as White citizens or were relegated to certain sections of such places when there was no substitute (i.e. city buses). In a case that began in 1892, Homer Plessy, a Black man who “appeared to be white” (Raffel, 1998) challenged segregationist practices on Louisiana railroad cars and saw his case appealed to the Supreme Court. The Court handed down the ruling four years later in 1896, in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, arguing that separate public facilities for Blacks and Whites were indeed constitutional as long as they were of equal standards – the origin of the now historic phrase “separate, but equal”.

For the next several decades, Blacks, increasingly growing tired of their relegated lower class status, continued to seek ways to eliminate barriers to equal opportunities for themselves and for future generations. For many, challenging the segregation of public schools was an ideal way to begin to address those barriers. The creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, one of the earliest civil rights organizations created, proved to be perhaps the most powerful mechanism in which to fight segregation throughout the south and ostensibly the nation. The organization’s Legal Defense Fund (LDF) initiated the *Brown* lawsuit. Argued by Thurgood Marshall and his team of attorneys, the case, although not immediately, would change the face of public education throughout the nation. On May 17, 1954 Chief Justice Earl Warren read the unanimous decision of the Court in the *Brown* case. The justices declared that segregated
schools would never be equal, putting an end to the *Plessy* doctrine of separate but equal. Separating students based on race would no longer be permitted in public education throughout the seventeen states in the south and the District of Columbia. It now appears though that after decades of battling to provide equal educational opportunities, we are quickly turning back the clock in public education.

*The Process of Resegregation*

As we celebrate the historic 50th anniversary of the *Brown* decision, cities across the country are witnessing reversals of their court mandated desegregation plans as lower courts, buttressed by recent Supreme Court decisions declare that these districts have achieved unitary status. Essentially, this status means that a district is no longer operating a dual system of public education legally segregated by race and “has repaired the damage caused by generations of segregation and overt discrimination” (Orfield & Eaton, 1996, p. 3). Following three major court decisions in the early and mid 1990s, namely *Board of Education of Oklahoma vs. Dowell* in 1991, *Freeman vs. Pitts* in 1992, and *Missouri vs. Jenkins* in 1995, the way has been paved for further resegregation (Yun & Reardon, 2002). The issue in unitary status rulings is whether the school districts involved have complied in good faith with the desegregation order. Consequently, school districts are being released from court oversight at an alarming rate, often because judges have tired of monitoring long-standing desegregation plans or because school districts have sought to end them. In the *Jenkins* case, the court not only ruled that equalization remedies should have time limits, it also decided that “school districts need not show any actual correction of the education harms of segregation” (Orfield & Eaton, 1996, p. xxiii). In more recent decisions in Boston and Charlotte-Mecklenburg for instance, White or Asian parents filed suit claiming that schools
which refuse to grant admittance to their children as a way of maintaining sufficient levels of racial diversity are violating their civil rights (Orfield, 2001). Given these recent decisions, it seems that the trend to end court ordered desegregation plans appears to have less to do with removing the vestiges of segregation and more to do with the fact that the judicial system now believes that the country has spent enough time on public school desegregation. Despite this trend, there are communities that remain committed to addressing issues of equity in public education and continue to view *Brown* as the way to achieve that.

*The Canton Community*

In the spring of 2000, one school district, faced with the prospect of racial and economic resegregation of its public schools after the termination of their long-standing desegregation order and the subsequent passage of a neighborhood schools law launched a successful movement to prevent a return to neighborhood schools. The Canton School District is by all accounts a fairly small district comprised of 33 square miles with only 10,702 students. The district is situated within the metropolitan area of Springdale, which has all the traits of other urban areas, namely an inner city population that is predominately Black with the majority of White residents living in the surrounding suburban neighborhoods. Although there are Latino and Asian populations residing in the Springdale area, they make up a very small percentage of the total population. Of the Canton School District’s roughly 10,000 students, current statistics report that the district is 56% White, 37.2% Black, 2.9% Latino, and 3.7% Asian. There are a total of eighteen public schools in the district, seventeen of which are included in this study.

Canton is also one of four school districts within the county that has been involved in desegregation litigation since the 1970s. Desegregation efforts within this community have
been implemented in several stages since that time, and the district’s current student assignment pattern is not legally considered a desegregation plan as a result of a 1995 court order, which terminated their long-standing desegregation plan. The current plan does however resemble the desegregation plan that had been in place for two decades leading up to the 1995 decision. In the Canton School District, students from the city attend schools in the suburbs for roughly nine of their twelve years of schooling while suburban students attend schools in the city for three of their years of schooling.

In April of 2000, the Neighborhood Schools Act (NSA) was passed within the state, which mandated that students attend the schools closest to their homes, without using race as a factor in student assignments. Additionally, the new law outlined specific grade configurations that would need to be adhered to. Although the NSA was passed at the statewide level, it was designed specifically to force the four districts involved in desegregation litigation to return to neighborhood schools. The two remaining districts in the county, for example, were never included in the original lawsuits. Proponents of neighborhood schools, led by the House Majority Leader, actively lobbied for the passage of the NSA in response to the relative inaction on the part of these four districts to end busing after the 1995 court decision. While two of the districts have subsequently returned to neighborhood schools and a third is currently working toward such a plan since the NSA was passed, the Canton School District is another story indeed, successfully preventing a return to neighborhood schools within their district. Responding to the NSA, several additional actors emerged from this study as well. By all accounts, the Canton School Board president initiated the call to city and suburban parents to challenge neighborhood schools and successfully aligned the board with key actors from the Black community to ensure the
continuation of their current student assignment plan instead. Examining where each of these actors was positioned within this process is a significant piece of the story. Moreover, it allows us to fully understand why Canton residents would believe that challenging the NSA was possible to begin with. Readers will be provided with a complete history of desegregation efforts in Canton, along with more detailed demographic data of the community and a comprehensive overview of the events that took place within this community in Chapter 4 of this work.

*Research Questions and Study Design*

Using qualitative methods of research, I interviewed parents, educators, and community leaders within the Canton School District to conduct an in depth examination of the process involved in preventing a return to neighborhood schools in order to determine the conditions under which a community can successfully maintain their current level of racial and economic diversity in the face of national and local efforts seeking to alter that. Specifically, I conducted a historical case study (Merriam, 1998) of the Canton School District in the Springdale metropolitan area to explore how and why this district was able to maintain their current student assignment plan despite the passage of a neighborhood schools law. Of particular importance in this case study is the extent to which the school district and the community actively participated in and supported efforts to challenge a law, which declared that the plan currently in use was no longer permissible. This study seeks to answer the following overarching research questions:

1) Why was the Canton community motivated to maintain their current student assignment plan?

2) How did the Canton community become mobilized to prevent a return to neighborhood schools?
These broadly conceived questions are aimed at uncovering the mechanisms by which this challenge to neighborhood schools occurred. One might argue for example that this particular community places a high value on ensuring diversity within public education, which in turn affects the types of educational reforms they would actively challenge. Or perhaps the district is small enough to ensure that student bus rides are shorter than those in neighboring districts, or that returning to neighborhood schools is cost prohibitive, both reasons which might make continuing the use of existing feeder patterns acceptable even to those who might otherwise have opted for a return to neighborhood schools. Regardless of the particular mechanisms operating within the district, this research seeks to understand under what conditions or circumstances those mechanisms became viable incentives to engender widespread, active community support for racially diverse schools. This analysis will lead us to understand how communities can maintain racial and economic diversity within the context of recent national and state level challenges. It seems that despite recent writings (Raffel, 1998; Rossell, Armor, & Walberg, 2002), which suggest that support for desegregation within the American public is waning as the focus shifts toward school choice, academic standards, and improving the quality of education, this study will present evidence that it is possible to find communities who continue to support efforts to preserve the promise of Brown.

The current study utilizes semi-structured interviews with Canton’s parents, educators, and community leaders, conducted during numerous visits to the community as the primary source of data collection. The additional gathering of documented data such as archived newspaper articles, personal correspondences, and materials disseminated to the Canton community during this process serve to support study results and increase the validity
of this research. It is important to note that results of the study are subject to my particular interpretation of what participants shared as they reflected on their experiences during the time the community responded to the NSA. I have tried to clearly identify my own beliefs and biases, and to reflect on how to avoid possible bias in conducting interviews and coding the data.

**Relevant Literature and Theoretical Framework**

In order to thoroughly examine each of the questions presented, along with countless others that arose during the writing of this dissertation, it is necessary to ground this work within the history of desegregation in the United States; the current social and political contexts of desegregation policies to date; and several theoretical perspectives which will help explain both the reasons and the process behind such compelling community activism. Three particular theories are relevant to this case study, which I will briefly identify at this point in the discussion and outline in greater depth in Chapter 2. The story of the Canton community will be framed within the theory of Social Movement (Tarrow, 1998), which allows us to situate this process within the context of contentious challenges to social policy and collective action. Readers will be introduced to the fundamental characteristics of social movements and will be shown the link between the struggle to prevent resegregation and these characteristics. Embedded within this work are two additional perspectives, which serve to frame particular components of what occurred in this community. Allport’s (1954) Contact theory is a useful way to examine the reasons that participants gave for opposing neighborhood schools and offers some insight into the values at work within the Canton community. Themes of equity and diversity dominated the interviews of those who opposed the NSA. Neighborhood school supporters pointed to community building and increased
levels of parental involvement as the primary reasons to embrace the new law. Finally Zimmerman’s (2000) theory of Community Empowerment provides us with a way to interpret the level of activism of Canton’s residents as they sought to respond to the law. Themes of leadership and activism emerged from participant interviews, and will be explored within this framework. Taken together, this literature frames the story of Canton and allows readers to fully understand the process that occurred there.

**Current Policy Relevance**

This study will examine Canton’s efforts within the context of existing debates and political mobilization surrounding current desegregation policies throughout the nation. Exploring the district’s efforts and situating them within the larger policy arena would allow the district to be utilized as both a unique and revelatory case (Yin, 2003). While the trend over the last decade has been to return to neighborhood schools, it is rare that a school district has successfully challenged such decisions and maintained their current student assignment plans. Subsequently, there has been little opportunity for scholarly examination of the particular process involved in such an effort. In *The Politics of School Desegregation*, Raffel (1980) notes Willie and Greenblatt’s contention that “only sparse information has been published concerning the success or failure of communities in their efforts to gain popular support for desegregation plans”. He further notes that others see a clear need to know how “school systems implement a desegregation plan and cope with the rancor and bitterness that often accompany desegregation” (p. 4). Although court ordered desegregation in Canton was lifted in 1995 and the plan they adopted was not based on race and is therefore not a desegregation plan, Raffel’s words are still important here.
Fifty years after *Brown*, the social and political landscape has changed from one where districts were struggling to develop desegregation plans to one in which many are struggling to prevent a return to schools that are racially identifiable. Once again, the need to present these stories has never been greater as we continue to seek ways to provide equal educational opportunities for all of our students. Findings from this study should be useful to other school districts facing similar challenges as they ascertain which components of the Canton story are relevant to current circumstances within their own communities. Given the possible relevance to other districts, it is critical to examine Canton’s efforts within the context of current desegregation debates, particularly those that advocate student assignments based on socioeconomic status rather than race alone in an effort to situate them within the larger national policy environment (Kahlenberg, 2003).

*Dissertation Outline*

The remainder of this work will be presented in several chapters. Chapter 2 provides readers with a more thorough overview of the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks utilized in this research. Within this, I will present the social and political context of current desegregation debates and introduce the three theoretical perspectives that guide this research. Chapter 3 will present the methodological framework and outline specific methods of data collection and analysis. Issues of validity and reliability will be addressed here as well. In chapter 4, readers will be introduced to the Canton community, which includes an overview of the current demographics, the layout of the community itself and a brief snapshot of what you will hear from Canton’s residents throughout the remainder of the study. Chapter 5, which begins the results section of this work, will highlight the primary reasons opponents gave for not supporting a neighborhood schools law. Chapter 6 will
present the secondary reasons participants chose to oppose the NSA, while Chapter 7 presents readers with the other side of the debate. In this section, readers will hear exclusively from neighborhood school supporters as they share why they were in favor of neighborhood schools. Chapter 8 will present the how of Canton’s story as I examine the actual processes that occurred which led to the mobilization of opponents of the NSA. Additionally, I will explore how neighborhood school supporters fit into this process as the community responded to the law. I will conclude with Chapter 9, which presents an overall analysis of what occurred within this community and implications for current desegregation policy in the United States. Limitations of the current research and recommendations for future studies will also be presented.
CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Throughout this review of literature, I will highlight the primary debates regarding desegregation policies in the United States and outline the theoretical frameworks within which this current study is grounded. In the first section, the current social context surrounding desegregation policies will be examined focusing primarily on the general attitudes of specific groups toward public school desegregation. Following this discussion, I will examine current desegregation trends in the U.S. in order to situate them within the current policy arena. This review will conclude with an introduction to the specific theories utilized to explain the process that took place within the Canton community as they responded to the NSA.

Attitudes Toward Desegregation

In a review of recent literature on desegregation, one aspect of the current social context appeared to be addressed most often, the opinions of stakeholders involved in the desegregation debate. This discussion focuses specifically on Blacks and Whites since historically they have been the primary groups involved in the desegregation debate. Although there has been an increased focus on the Latino population within desegregation debates, this particular group will be omitted from this review of literature because they are not included within the study of Canton.

Orfield (2001) reports that in a recent Gallup Poll of Black/White relations in the U.S., there is “an extremely high level of acceptance and approval of integrated education
among both blacks and whites, with a strong majority saying desegregation improves education for blacks, and a growing proportion of the public believing that it improves education for whites as well” (p. 6). He notes, however, that contrary to this idea, most people throughout the nation also have a preference for neighborhood schools which leaves us in a quandary given that neighborhood schools more often than not mean economic and/or racial segregation (Yun & Reardon, 2002). It seems that while most Americans believe in educating young people of all races side by side, they also wish to do so closer to home.

Powell (2002) confirms this contradiction, pointing out that although recent polls tell us that Americans believe in integration, there is a strong belief that Blacks currently have the same opportunity to receive quality education as Whites. Addressing this particular conflict of ideals, he notes “While we support the idea of integration in principle, we do not support it in practice…” (p.14). Given such contradictions, we need to take a closer look at several groups with a stake in current debates about desegregating public schools. Because much of this debate overlaps with the policy context of racial desegregation, I will attempt to cover the primary issues between both sections of this review.

It is safe to say that the debate surrounding public school desegregation has been going on between Americans since the Brown decision (Adair, 1984). Although this still appears to be the case, I would argue that one of the most important debates about desegregation, past and present, continues to be that occurring both between and within racial groups, because ultimately discussions about desegregation are discussions about race. When the initial decision was handed down in 1954, it was done amidst a backdrop of tension. The obvious tension was between Whites and Blacks, but the tension within groups was in many ways more subtle and divisive, particularly for Blacks. How do we work to find
ways to eliminate racial inequities when there is not always agreement within groups as to how to do so? For many Blacks, integrated schools were the answer to their prayers as dreams of improved life chances dangled before their eyes. For others, it spelled the end of unification as images of further discrimination and hostility haunted them (Green, 1999). Fifty years later, such conflicting images are still with us.

Today, much of this debate within the Black community gets played out in discussions of school choice and community control as state takeovers and other reforms continue to be implemented. There are those who argue that attempts to successfully integrate our children have failed so we must look within our own community to find solutions. Research on the negative effects of tracking and racial segregation within integrated schools (Bush, Burley, & Causey-Bush, 2001; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2002; Oakes, 1995) is presented as evidence of such failure, and rightfully so, cannot be ignored. Some scholars point to the declining level of support for desegregation on the part of Blacks as a result of mandatory plans such as busing that did not necessarily prove to be beneficial and in fact came at a high cost for many students and their families (Rossell, Armor, & Walberg, 2002).

Blacks in favor of voucher plans, neighborhood schools, or the creation of ethnocentric schools for example have sounded the alarm to say that we should wake up and smell the coffee. For many, the argument is that children of color will never be given equal opportunities in education as long as they remain in schools that are poorly funded and badly run – in other words run by Whites and/or in neighborhoods that have been abandoned by social and political elites. Some parents for example, argue that improving the quality of public schools is more important at this point than changing the racial make up within them
(Joondeph, 1998). Moreover, some of the anti-integration rhetoric comes from the misguided notion that those who support desegregation must believe that children of color are in some way inferior and that attending schools with White children is beneficial simply because they need to be with or learn from White children (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Such perceptions about pro-desegregation beliefs contribute to the negative feelings toward efforts to desegregate public schools.

For every Black citizen who does not support desegregation, there are others who think differently. For many, the support for desegregation is based on the same principles that have been at the heart of the fight to integrate public schools since the beginning. As discussed earlier, we know that attendance in desegregated schools, which tend to have better qualified teachers, newer facilities/resources, more rigorous curriculum, and higher levels of expectations of their students, provides opportunities for Black children to improve academic achievement and future life chances. For many supporters, this is the value in having Black students attend schools with their White counterparts, not as others suggest, simply to sit next to them.

Although there is still wide spread support for desegregation among the Black community, it is fair to say that there is some disagreement as to how to go about implementing such plans. There has been and continues to be a history of wanting to see desegregation policies implemented, but much of the debate has been whether these plans should be mandatory or voluntary (Rosswell, Armor, & Walberg, 2002). It seems that even among Black supporters of desegregation, there is some resistance to mandatory desegregation plans, although this resistance was much higher in the 1970s when such strategies were first introduced. Despite this resistance, there are those who favor busing and
believe that there have been clear benefits to Black students who have participated in such programs (Eaton, 2001; Orfield, 2001). Further, there is evidence to suggest that there continues to be widespread support from Whites for desegregation policies as well (Orfield, 2001; Powell, 2002).

Those Whites who continue to oppose desegregation, particularly those with a more conservative background, may actually point to the fact that there are representatives within the Black community who are calling for other alternatives. It is not unreasonable to suggest that some Whites may point to these sentiments and ask, “If African Americans don’t even want desegregation, why are we still trying to make it happen?” Orfield and Eaton (1996) address this in their discussion on the role of the press in perpetuating the idea that Black opposition to desegregation has increased when in fact it has not. They note that there has never been full agreement within this community about the need to desegregate. Of course what gets lost here is that Blacks may have more valid arguments for not continuing with current desegregation efforts based on cases of ineffective implementation among other things; situations that have not yielded positive results for their children as promised. Whites, on the other hand simply cannot make the same argument about promises not kept concerning improvements in academic achievement for their children.

Certainly there are other stakeholders in this very public debate. Divisions are evident between residents of differing communities as well, particularly those living in the inner cities and the outlying suburbs. There is a long history of desegregation efforts which have attempted to integrate students from these communities, culminating in the 1974 Milliken decision barring interdistrict remedies for segregation between the city of Detroit and the surrounding suburban neighborhoods (Joondeph, 1998; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). This
ruling primarily affected cities in the north, which have a greater percentage of suburban communities than cities in the southern region of the United States where countywide districts encompass schools that serve larger populations of White and Black children. Despite the Milliken ruling, however, there have been programs across the country that include suburban residents, but they tend to primarily be voluntary programs where students of color are bused into these neighborhoods or where suburban students come into urban communities to attend magnet schools.

Although many of the magnet schools were essentially created with the express purpose of bringing White students back into urban communities, it appears that there is no evidence of large droves of these students being lured back to inner city schools as predicted (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Roswell, Armor, & Walberg, 2002). Even when schools are created to offer White and Black students alike a more specialized and rigorous curriculum, Black students continue to be more likely to utilize them if they are in urban neighborhoods because the idea of sending their children into urban areas for school does not seem to appeal to a large majority of White families (Roswell, Armor, & Walberg, 2002). Although many scholars believe that the most effective way to bring about true desegregation would be to create metropolitan-wide plans which would include both sets of residents (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Powell, 2002), past court judgments and current decision making by White suburban parents suggest that such strategies will not be implemented any time soon.

It is also important to note that Whites are not the only residents living in suburban neighborhoods as there continues to be a growing middle class Black population residing in the suburbs. Blacks who have higher levels of education and income often move into

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\(^2\) Orfield & Eaton note that Whites have not returned to neighborhood schools because of demographic trends (i.e. low birth rates) and the increase in White suburbanization that took place throughout the country occurred before desegregation plans were implemented.
suburban communities in search of neighborhoods that offer more resources and services (Massey, Condran, & Denton, 1987), which includes high quality schools. One would likely assume that these residents would not normally be in favor of mandatory desegregation plans which would make it necessary for some of their children to attend schools outside of their immediate neighborhood.

There is some evidence in the current desegregation literature suggesting that debates about desegregation between stakeholders may be related to factors other than race or place of residence. Pride and May (1999) examined public opinion about returning to neighborhood schools in Nashville and discovered that there was more support for neighborhood schools among adults with older children or no children at all. Supporting reforms that may cost more money for those who would derive little benefit from them appears to be a difficult thing to do for some. Results from this study further demonstrate that adults of childbearing age with no children and those with children in public school do not generally prefer neighborhood schools. The authors note, however, that couples with children currently in public schools presented opinions on both sides. Perhaps, it is more difficult for those with children presently in the public school system to choose between neighborhood schools or improved school quality, which is often the impression residents are given when faced with this decision. One final result of this study suggests that adults with higher levels of education tend not to support neighborhood schools as well. Given the opportunity, well-educated adults seem to also choose quality schools over those located nearby if they perceive that these factors are mutually exclusive.

It appears that current feelings about public school desegregation continue to be in large part dependent on the perception of benefits to be derived from such policies. If there
is little benefit to gain from integrating public schools, as may be the case for suburban families, older adults, or Blacks who have negative experiences with ineffective desegregation plans, it should be no surprise that these populations may not fully endorse such efforts.

Desegregation Policy Debates

As we examine the debates about public school desegregation, we need to do so within the context of current educational policy. Since the initial 1954 *Brown* decision, the nation has witnessed several shifts in educational reform, each of which has had an impact on desegregation policies. Indeed, some of these reforms were compatible with desegregation, while others have appeared to be in direct opposition to efforts to eliminate educational inequities. The following discussion will focus only on the most recent discussions of desegregation efforts in the nation’s schools. Before addressing this, however, it is important to examine the perceived effectiveness of desegregation policies specifically in an effort to provide a more thorough picture of the current desegregation landscape.

The Effectiveness of Desegregation Policies

As a result of our inherent inability to integrate public schools and provide quality education to all students simultaneously, strategies designed to improve educational equity continue to be a necessary component of public education in this country. Currently there is a great deal of debate about whether to continue efforts to desegregate our schools or whether such measures are no longer necessary and/or effective.

On one side of the debate, we have scholars and policy makers who argue that desegregation, as currently implemented, has failed to bring about any major changes in academic achievement or status between Whites and Blacks. As Wells (1995) offers “Many
Americans refer to school desegregation as a ‘failed social experiment’ – one that resulted in massive white flight, resegregation within desegregated schools, loss of jobs for Black educators and a greater sense of alienation among Black youth” (p. 691). In addition to these common beliefs about the failure of public school desegregation, Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield (2003) point to more recent “myths” such as the idea that districts have learned how to equalize racially segregated schools and that providing more money for these schools will be as effective as integrating them (p. 10). Other scholars suggest that desegregation programs should be dismantled because they simply haven’t improved outcomes for people of color. In a study of the relationship between desegregation, academic achievement, and future earnings, Rivkin (1999) concluded that because there was no real evidence that desegregation programs led to increased earnings for Blacks for example, improving the quality of schools attended by these students would be a more effective method of improving achievement and earnings, primary predictors of status, than reassigning students to different schools.³ Neighborhood schools advocates believe desegregation efforts have dragged on for far too long. They operate under several of the misconceptions described above and argue that a return to neighborhood schools for example would increase parent involvement and White enrollment in urban public schools, neither of which has actually occurred in districts that have been declared unitary (Frankenberg, et al, 2003; Weiler, 1998). Moreover, they operate under the assumption that putting more money into neighborhood schools is an effective solution to reducing educational inequities. Michael Alves in Kahlenberg (2000) describes such practices in this way, “Education reform is out there trying to make Plessy v. Ferguson work” (p. 7).

³ Reported findings are discussed in terms of involuntary desegregation programs alone.
For those who oppose current desegregation policies, each of these misconceptions serves to confirm the idea that desegregation should be discontinued either altogether or in favor of some other alternative.

Within the debate about the need to continue desegregation strategies, there is of course another side. As mentioned in an earlier section of this paper, large numbers of Americans continue to be in favor of desegregation efforts and there is a great deal of research that contradicts the findings of those who suggest this policy has failed. Much of the literature concerning the relationship of desegregation to academic achievement for Black students demonstrates that these students perform better in integrated schools (Ascher, 1993; Frankenberg et al, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Powell, 2002). Further, research that examines the effects of desegregation on inter-group relations demonstrates positive outcomes as well. Schofield and Sagar (1977) framed their research on peer interactions in integrated schools within Allport’s Contact Theory and concluded that interracial contact in these settings does in fact improve relations between groups of students.

Results on the long-term effects of desegregating public schools also offer a promising outlook for desegregation efforts. Current research demonstrates a positive relationship between desegregation and outcomes such as college attendance and completion rates, earnings from future income, and increased opportunities for integrated residential and employment patterns. According to Dawkins and Braddock (1994), there is sufficient evidence to suggest that attending desegregated schools in elementary and high school is

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4 A great deal of this literature discusses these positive results in the context of both racial and economic desegregation as they point out that schools with larger percentages of White students also tend to be more middle class and have more resources.

5 This research demonstrated improvements in relations in 7th grade only and when specific environmental factors cited by Allport were achieved. Results from 8th grade interactions were negatively affected by institutional mechanisms such as ability grouping.
positively related to attendance at predominately White institutions of higher education and
to disrupting generational cycles of segregation. As we know, eliminating the vestiges of
racial discrimination within education is the primary mechanism for disrupting this cycle in
adult life as well.

Supporters of desegregation continue to point to this body of research as evidence
that such efforts will make a difference in the lives of people of color. Despite the many
claims that opponents of desegregation make about the ability of other strategies to ensure
educational equity, the evidence clearly suggests that desegregation measures are in no way
outdated and unnecessary. An important point to make here is that for many of those active
in this debate, the success or failure of desegregation efforts is more a question of effective
implementation rather than whether the actual policy is appropriate to reduce educational
gaps. There are those who might suggest that we can’t deem desegregation efforts a total
success or failure yet because they have never been fully implemented in the first place.

*Current Policy Trends*

As we know, there have been numerous reforms within American public education
which frame discussions about how well our schools are preparing young people for the
future. Recent reforms have generally fallen into two categories, those designed to increase
the quality of education (excellence) vs. those designed to provide equal educational
opportunities for all students (equity) (Katz, 1987; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). It is a curious
thing that these agendas cannot seem to occur simultaneously as we appear to be unable to
develop strategies that realistically address issues of race and class and at the same time
improve the quality of all schools. The *Brown* decision was quite obviously a reform aimed
primarily at eliminating racial inequities. Subsequently, it received the most support from
administrations concerned about such matters both in education and society in general as evidenced by the passing of the Civil Rights Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Voting Rights act. Desegregation policies have, on the other hand, suffered under administrations that have been more conservative, less committed to addressing inequities, and more focused on demonstrating excellence. Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and Bush have all had opportunities to support further implementation of desegregation policies but have chosen instead to limit both funding and enforcement in this area (Orfield, 1999).

Further, some would argue that the most damaging legacy of these three presidents has been their conservative Supreme Court appointments, which have effectively shifted the ideology of the Court from the left to the right (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). This conservative shift has essentially managed to jump start a process whereby dozens of court mandated desegregation plans have been reversed, paving the way for increased levels of racial resegregation in our nation’s schools (Yun & Reardon, 2002). Once the Dowell, Pitts, and Jenkins decisions were handed down by a conservative Supreme Court, a clear message was sent to the lower courts that they could count on the support of the highest court in the nation if they chose to begin dismantling desegregation plans (Joondeph, 1998).

Although many of these reversals have been initiated by school districts seeking a return to neighborhood schools, some of the more recent reversals by the lower courts were not initiated by school districts at all. Rather, some of these cases were instigated by judges who took it upon themselves to decide that the time had come for such plans to be terminated or by parents of White and/or Asian students who felt that their civil rights had been violated when their applications to particular schools were denied (Orfield, 2001). What is most egregious perhaps is the fact that the courts have also begun to block school districts from
implementing *voluntary* desegregation plans (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Of interest here is also the fact that some see these recent decisions as a paradox of sorts because at the same time the courts have declared that they should cease “on-going judicial intervention” in these cases, they have refused to provide the types of remedies that would ensure less court involvement (Vergon in Harris, 1997, p. 51). If we listen closely, we can hear the same rationale that was used in the *Plessy* era when policy makers promised educational equity while allowing students to remain in segregated schools. It didn’t work in 1896 and there is little evidence to suggest that it will work in 2005.

**Alternatives to Current Desegregation Policies**

While many believe that desegregation continues to have a place in American public education despite the recent focus on standards and accountability, there is a growing movement to rethink the factors that should be considered in the allocation of students to schools. In effect, should we be looking to modify current desegregation policies based on demographic changes, political agendas, and the like? In the previous sections, I have neglected to discuss the issue of segregation by socioeconomic status (SES), an omittance by design actually as it is best situated within this section of the review. Based on my review of the recent desegregation literature, the most common theme to emerge within policy debates was the idea that we may need to shift our focus specifically from race to class.

There is a great deal of evidence within the body of literature reviewed that racial segregation is inextricably connected to poverty. Joondeph (1998) notes that “a school that is 90% black or hispanic is fourteen times more likely to be a high poverty school than a school that is less than 10% black or hispanic” and suggests that these kinds of high concentrations of poverty serve to create a myriad of barriers to the educational process (p.
2). Orfield (2001) contends that while Black students typically attend high poverty schools, Latino students are segregated in schools with the highest poverty rates overall. Schools with predominately White segregated student enrollments are generally middle class. Similarly, in their study, Frankenberg, et al (2003) find that while 15% of the highly segregated White schools had over half of their students receiving free or reduced lunch, for highly segregated Black and Latino schools this figure soared to 86%. They go on to argue that “…trends towards increasing segregation for the nation’s minority students should be considered in the context of segregation’s strong correlation to poverty” (p. 35). There are certainly others who would agree.

As a result of the current trend to back away from desegregation plans based on racial demographics and the obvious link between race and SES, some scholars are suggesting that we specifically consider income as the defining factor in desegregation efforts. They argue that implementing economic desegregation policies would serve to limit the number of judicial challenges to such policies while at the same time continue to address educational inequities. Kahlenberg (2000) may be one of the most outspoken advocates of this type of desegregation and argues that ultimately it is what Horace Mann had in mind when he described schools as “the great equalizer” (p. 1). He goes on to argue that having a larger percentage of middle class families within a school is what makes the difference in terms of such factors as teacher quality and high expectations because these families settle for no less. He cites studies conducted in New Mexico, Texas, and Wisconsin as evidence that when low-income students are placed in educational settings with middle class children, their academic achievement improves. Additionally, he concludes that economic segregation would be well received by conservatives who say that deeming predominately Black schools
inferior is an insult, and by liberals who truly understand the connection between being Black or Latino and being poor, and the need to desegregate schools that contain large populations of both (p. 7). Although there are districts across the nation that are currently operating under desegregation plans developed some time ago, there is evidence to suggest that changes in how we implement these plans are coming down the pike. As scholars and the public alike continue to debate this issue, new ways to think about reducing racial and economic inequities are becoming more apparent.

Theoretical Framework

As the story in Canton is presented, it is essential to frame it within a context that helps explain how a particular community experiences the contentious dynamics inherent in collective action, community organizing, and ultimately, social change. While no single theory offers readers a complete explanation of what took place in Canton, several theories taken together do prove to be useful as we seek to understand this story. To comprehend how the Canton community became mobilized to challenge a return to neighborhood schools, macro-level concepts are required in order to determine the circumstances under which it is possible to engender widespread, active community support for student assignment plans which maintain racial and economic diversity within the context of national and state level challenges to those plans. Answering the “why” in this case although critical, does not fully explain the events that took place within the Canton community. We must therefore examine what occurred through a broader lens if we are to fully conceptualize this story. In essence, we must also examine the “how” of Canton’s story and Social Movement theory (Tarrow, 1998) offers us a way to view the “big picture” if you will. Additionally, Contact theory (Allport, 1954), and Community Empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000) are useful
frameworks as we examine the micro level processes that were taking place within this larger story. Finally, the story of Canton allows us to contribute to these theories by applying them to a situation where they can be tested and expanded in an effort to advance our understanding of them. Each of these frameworks will be summarized below in an effort to fully frame the events that took place within this community.

**Social Movement Theory**

Situating the study within the social movement literature helps us understand the process that took place in Canton. Landis (1977) offers a fairly simple definition of social movements as “a group of people acting with some continuity to promote or to resist a change in their society or group” (p. 310). Tarrow (1998) puts forward a similar but more comprehensive definition noting that social movements are “collective challenges based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (p. 4). Within his definition, Tarrow provides what he identifies as the key empirical properties of social movements, which are collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction (p. 4). Traditional social movement theorists argue that these elements necessitate the separation of social movements from general notions of collective behavior, which has traditionally been characterized by disorganization and spontaneity. Although there are slight variations on these elements depending on whose work one is reading, scholars agree that certain elements identified only with social movements clearly differentiate the two concepts from one another. Locher (2002) for instance identifies three components of social movements, noting that they are organized, deliberate, and enduring. Historically, social movements have been viewed as having specific strategies, and participants are often assigned particular tasks, thereby making them
far more organized than most instances of collective behavior. These movements generally
don’t tend to occur spontaneously, but are instead well planned unlike what takes place with
mobs or other forms of collective behavior. Additionally, social movements have not usually
been considered short-term events in that they can span several years or longer unlike a riot
for instance which is generally short lived (p. 233). Most importantly, social movements are
always concerned with effecting social change within society at large or within a particular
community, a fundamentally different outcome than what occurs with the various forms of
collective behavior. In fact the very notion that social movements actually have a goal is
central to the argument that although there may be some similarities between social
movements and collective behavior, the differences are far more important. As a result,
identifying social movements as a form of collective action, a term not generally viewed as
pejorative, is perhaps a more accurate way to present them and will be used to do so
throughout the remainder of this research.

Given the traditional notions of social movements, one might be inclined to quickly
dismiss what took place within the Canton community as a social movement. There are
however enough elements within this story to warrant applying the concepts of social
movements to Canton in an attempt to understand how and why the community responded as
they did. Moreover, recent scholars have expanded traditional notions of social movement
theory and put forth the idea that today’s social movements have taken on a different form
than movements that occurred in previous decades (Binder, 2002; Burstein, 1999;
Katzenstein, 1998; Giugni, 1999). New social movement theorists argue that we need to
reexamine social movements keeping this in mind.
One of the primary ways that scholars need to adjust their thinking about social movements concerns where today’s movements are situated. In the past, social movements typically occurred when oppressed groups of individuals banded together to challenge the state (i.e. large economic and/or political systems). Current movements however are most likely to occur within institutions as individuals seek to create or resist policies that are far more “localized”. Challenges to oppressive or inequitable practices within schools and churches for instance are frequently the site of social movements today (Binder, 2002; Katzenstein, 1998; Moore, 1999). Secondly, and closely related to this first aspect is the idea that historically social movements had fairly clear divisions between targets (i.e. the government) and challengers (i.e. citizens) – often referred to as “insiders” and “outsiders” respectively (Katzenstein, 1998; Mitra, 2005). Current scholars suggest that the line between insiders and outsiders is far more blurred than previously thought. With the rise in institutionalized movements, challengers are not always those on the outside with little to no power. Many of today’s challenges are actually initiated by those on the inside or at the very least; outsiders often have clear allies within the targeted institutions. In her research on Afrocentric and Creationist movements within public school systems - movements led largely by dissatisfied parents, Binder (2002) describes how some educators came to believe in the goals of these movements, thus becoming challengers as well. Similarly, Katzenstein (1998) points to women already in positions of power within the military who challenged inequitable practices in that particular system.

A third aspect of modern social movements is how they occur. The use of violence, protests, or sit-ins, which are designed to disrupt everyday business, is not how movements usually occur as individuals currently seek to bring about social change. Much of what takes
place today is conversation, albeit conversation which is intended to create a particular kind of disruption. Known as “discursive politics” today’s challengers engage individuals in dialogue, which is meant to “reinterpret, reformulate, rethink and rewrite the norms and practices of society and state” (Katzenstein, 1998, p. 17). The repertoire of change strategies for today’s challengers relies more heavily on verbal and cognitive mechanisms rather than physical ones as they attempt to disrupt the status quo (Klandermans, 1992; Mitra, 2005).

Finally, scholars argue that we must pay more attention to the context within which social movements emerge – contexts which are largely responsible for a movement’s failure or success. It should be noted here that this idea is actually not new as earlier scholars expanded on previous theories of social movement and developed a theory that specifically addressed this particular aspect (Tarrow, 1998). Known as Political Opportunity Structure, this perspective is concerned with identifying the social, economic, and political climate within which a movement occurs. Current researchers continue to stress the importance of examining social movement activities from this lens (Binder, 2002; Moore, 1999; Giugni, 1999). Tarrow (1998), for instance notes that there are several contextual aspects of social movements in particular that researchers should be mindful of. He offers that one should examine: 1) how much access challengers have to political systems; 2) the instability of political alignments; 3) the possibility of elite alliances; and 4) cleavages or schisms among elites. Each of these areas has a great deal of influence on both the process and the outcome of any movement.

Similarly, Moore (1999) suggests that institutional vulnerability is a critical component to examine as well. In her study of the impact of Vietnam War protests on the history of American science, she offers four distinct areas where institutions are vulnerable to
challenges: 1) rapid growth, an infusion of money or new membership; 2) the diffuseness of the institution; 3) the link between clients and professionals within the institution; and 4) the link between the institution and the state. Moreover, she argues that the higher the degree of overlap between insiders and outsiders, the more likely it is that a movement will succeed.

While traditional notions of social movement theory still have much to teach us about community mobilization, current theorists have clearly provided valuable new insights into how to examine collective action in today’s society. Given the advances in social movement theory, discussing what occurred in Canton from this lens is especially useful. As particular segments of the community organized to ensure the initial passage of the NSA, others organized specifically to resist implementing it. Throughout the remainder of this work, readers will surely see elements of both current and traditional notions of social movements within this struggle.

Contact Theory

Gordon Allport’s (1954) work provides a useful lens from which to work from as readers consider the reasons study participants chose to support maintaining the current student assignment plan in Canton. In his original work, Allport identifies various types of contact between different racial/ethnic groups, ranging from casual situations to those where contact with various groups is more sustained, such as residential or occupational contacts. For each of these types of contacts, he provides examples of what they represent and presents a discussion about the likely outcome of such contact. A critical component in this theory is that there are a variety of factors or conditions, which impact the likely outcome of intergroup contact. These factors have to do with how often individuals come into contact with one another or whether or not individuals have equal status for instance.
While Allport’s work serves as the foundation for studies of intergroup relations, scholars have continued to study this phenomenon, further refining and expanding his original hypothesis. Brown (1995) notes that of the six conditions necessary for successful contact that Allport originally identified, four of them should be considered especially important. He suggests that one of the most significant factors impacting intergroup contact is the level of institutional support present for such interactions. Having those in authority fully supporting the development of intergroup relationships is critical to the success of these relationships because they generally have the power to create an alternative climate, which promotes the development of new relationships. The second critical factor for ensuring successful interactions is what Brown calls acquaintance potential, which refers to the frequency and duration of contact. Contacts should be sufficient enough in terms of the amount of time individuals spend together during each interaction and how often those contacts occur to allow for the development of positive attitudes about other individuals or groups. Third is the idea that intergroup contact is likely to generate more positive results if the individuals involved are “equal-status participants” (p. 242). Having individuals whom are generally equal in status interact with one another is a way to confront the notion of inferiority, which is so often the basis of discrimination between individuals and groups. Brown argues that the final condition that must be present for intergroup contact to be successful is cooperation. If interactions designed to reduce prejudice are to indeed accomplish that, those involved in the interaction must not be in situations where competition is perceived. Rather individuals and groups should be in settings where collaborating with one another to complete a task for instance is necessary in order to promote positive relationships.
Pettigrew (1998) expands on the contact hypothesis by addressing questions raised as a result of Allport’s original notion of intergroup relationships. He argues that in addition to the conditions that Allport identified, other processes are at work, which “operate through contact and mediate attitude change” thus ensuring the success of intergroup interactions. As a result of his work, Pettigrew offers four specific processes: 1) learning new information about the outgroup; 2) changing behavior in an effort to conform to new expectations; 3) generating affective ties (i.e. developing empathy); and 4) reappraising ingroup attitudes and beliefs (p. 69). Further expansion of Allport’s work addresses the idea of generalization and provides additional factors to consider such as whether the positive attitudes generated by successful contact transfer from individuals to whole groups, whether those attitudes transfer between different situations, and whether those attitudes transfer from the outgroup of initial contact to other outgroups with no prior contact (Brewer & Gaertner, 2001). Finally, much of the research conducted after the 1950s presents evidence to suggest that although there appear to be additional conditions or factors involved in determining successful intergroup interactions, not all of those conditions are absolutely necessary. Some of the conditions presented merely facilitate the development of positive outcomes, but are not actually essential for them to occur (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Pettigrew, 1989).

Scholars have applied these conditions to educational settings as they examined strategies designed to reduce prejudice within schools. As a result, contact theory has become particularly useful in studies of the effects of school desegregation on intergroup relations. Schofield’s exploration of intergroup interactions among students attending integrated schools has been especially valuable. Schofield and Sagar (1977) for example concluded that interracial contact in school settings does in fact improve relations between
groups of students. Expanding on this, however, Schofield (1989) argues that in the absence of the conditions Allport identified, intergroup interactions actually have the capacity to reinforce negative opinions and perpetuate stereotypes among students. Even in settings where these conditions were deliberately put in place, which is clearly not the norm, Schofield’s subsequent observations of student behavior demonstrated that students still tended to be segregated during informal interactions (Brown, 1995, p. 249). Other studies have examined whether categorizing students attending integrated high schools into one group (i.e. we are all on the same team) or into two groups (i.e. us and them) results in different levels of bias and determined that both of these groupings can serve to create positive intergroup relationships depending on how they are applied (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994).

Ensuring the development of positive intergroup relations in any setting is not an easy task, a claim that research clearly supports. Allport’s claim that specific conditions must be present in order to do so and the subsequent expansions to his original theory continue to give us something to aim for in the meantime. Exploring the process that occurred in Canton utilizing contact theory certainly helps us understand why residents may have been motivated to challenge a policy that they viewed as detrimental to the future of their community.

**Empowerment Theory**

While the contact hypothesis helps us understand why study participants decided to challenge the NSA, Zimmerman’s (2000) empowerment theory is a useful framework within which to examine precisely how these participants became mobilized to do so. Empowerment in general can be viewed as “the process and consequences of efforts to exert

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6 This research demonstrated improvements in relations in 7th grade only and when specific environmental factors cited by Allport were achieved. Results from 8th grade interactions were negatively affected by institutional mechanisms such as ability grouping.
control and influence over decisions that affect one’s life, organizational functioning and, the quality of community life” (p. 43). Zimmerman further notes that active participation with others, developing ways to secure access to resources, and a basic understanding of one’s “sociopolitical environment” are fundamental components of empowerment (p.44). Embedded within this theory is the idea that empowerment is related to both a process and an outcome (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Specifically, the very nature of the activities one engages in such as shared leadership and collective decision-making (the process) can be empowering to individuals, while the result of these activities, policy changes or access to new resources for example (the outcomes), can “result in a level of being empowered” (p.570). In expanding the idea of the concept itself, Zimmerman (2000) further notes that empowerment can occur at a number of levels (individual, organizational, and community) and needs to be examined at each. Community empowerment is the level from which this study has been analyzed.

“An empowered community is one that initiates efforts to improve the community, responds to threats to quality of life, and provides opportunities for citizen participation” (Zimmerman, 2000, p.54). Additionally, community empowerment theory suggests that there are a number of alliances or coalitions working collectively to improve the quality of life within a given community (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 571). Much of the research on community empowerment has focused on improving social service delivery and addressing health concerns in particular communities, particularly examining the link between citizen participation and empowerment (McMillan, Florin, Stevenson, Kerman, & Mitchell, 1995; Speer, Jackson, & Peterson, 2001). Situating this study within the community empowerment research allows us to expand this work and examine the central concepts of citizen
participation, coalition building, and empowerment within an educational policy context as well. The process that took place in Canton provides a unique opportunity to explore the connections between these ideas as the community worked to develop a response to the NSA. Within that process of course, one should expect to see individuals who felt empowered prior to the enactment of the NSA, as well as those who became empowered as a result of the community’s specific response to it. Many of the participants in this study indeed fell into one of these categories. There are others, however, who did not feel a sense of empowerment on either end. Nevertheless, there were some interesting observations made by participants in general about how they viewed themselves and about how they viewed others throughout the process.
CHAPTER 3

Methodological Framework

Given the trend to declare that more and more districts across the country have become unitary systems and therefore should return to neighborhood schools, examining the conditions under which the Canton community actively participated in efforts to maintain their current student assignment plan is likely to be a topic of interest for policy makers and researchers alike. Exploring the perspectives of those most involved in and affected by these efforts provides additional depth to the story itself. Conducting a qualitative research study is an appropriate method of inquiry for examining these conditions and perspectives given that exploring how those involved attach meaning to these events and understanding the context within which these meanings are formed are best suited to this type of research (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17). Qualitative research offers several traditions of inquiry that can be utilized to conduct a study of this kind.

A case study is perhaps the most useful approach for this particular study as it offers a way to provide an in-depth presentation of a certain phenomenon. Merriam (1988) defines a case study as an “examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group” (p.9). Marshall and Rossman (1999) offer that case studies “take the reader into the setting with a vividness and detail not typically present in more analytical reporting formats” (p. 159). Finally, Creswell (1998) describes the case study method of research as “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through a detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 61). Each of these descriptions identifies the case study approach as one
that allows the researcher to present the topic under study with a detailed, descriptive lens. Additionally, utilizing a case study approach to conduct this particular study provides a way to explore the actors within the context of the school and the community within which they reside.

The current research is being conducted as a historical case study, which primarily utilizes historical data to present specific events or programs to explore the contextual factors that surround such occurrences. Although typically such case studies are conducted many years after the fact when the actors are no longer available, using a historical case study to examine the primary research question, *how one community became mobilized to support efforts to prevent a return to neighborhood schools* is a legitimate approach. Merriam (1998) writes, “To understand an event and apply one’s knowledge to present practice means knowing the context of the event, the assumptions behind it, and perhaps the event’s impact on the institution or participants” (p.24). This chapter will provide an overview of the methods used to collect data for this case study, followed by the mechanisms used to analyze and interpret the results. Following this, I will discuss how issues of validity and reliability were addressed within the study and conclude with a brief summary of how the results will be presented in Chapters 5 through 8.

*Data Collection*

Data collection for the study took place from September 2003 – February 2005 and consisted of gathering documented archival data about the process that took place as the community responded to the NSA and regular visits to Canton to interview parents, educators, and community leaders. A total of ten visits were made to the community during the period of study. Documented materials that were collected include, but are not limited to
1) Census data for the Springdale Metropolitan area; 2) Archived newspaper articles; 3) Proposed neighborhood school plans for the Canton School District and the financial implications of each; 4) Strategic plans for the District; 5) The Neighborhood Schools Act; 6) The research on high poverty schools gathered by the Board; 7) School Board minutes; 8) The Voter’s Guide; 9) A tape of the cable TV spot; and 10) Published books/articles about the state’s desegregation history. Both the interviews and the documented material provided a thorough picture of the types of material generated during the effort to maintain Canton’s current student assignment plan as well as the various arguments presented by each side.

During the first two visits to Canton, I spent time driving around the community (city and suburban neighborhoods) in an attempt to become familiar with the layout of the area and learn the location of the 17 schools included in the study. My host, a personal friend and fellow researcher who resides in the district and has children in the public schools there, initially gave me a driving tour of the community, pointing out specific neighborhoods, schools, shopping areas and other landmarks. Once I had a fairly basic understanding of how Canton was laid out, I struck out on my own with several maps and a tape recorder, ready to begin this journey. As I drove to each school, I recorded my impressions of the school itself and the surrounding neighborhood, being sure to include the demographic make up of residents I happened to see while there. These first several visits were both interesting and productive as I began gaining an immediate sense of life for residents within the Canton community.

Once I became more familiar with Canton’s layout, I began visiting churches, community centers, local community organizations, and libraries to introduce the study and seek volunteers to participate. I began making personal contacts at each site and additionally
posted fliers with information about the study on bulletin boards and in other public places. I also left sign up sheets which staff members could have parents sign if they were willing to be interviewed. Unfortunately, while these early trips did result in making preliminary contacts with individuals who agreed to disseminate information about the study to parents, they didn’t immediately result in the recruitment of specific parents. For instance, as I would visit the sites on subsequent trips to the community, staff members would tell me that they had no parents who signed up for the study. Given the situation, it became obvious that parents would need to be recruited in a very different way.

My host agreed to contact several parents within her neighborhood and one or two surrounding areas to ask if they would be willing to have me contact them, which resulted in several referrals. I also observed a PTA meeting during one of my earlier trips and was able to recruit parents from that meeting as well. Overall, twelve parents were contacted by phone to introduce the study and set a time to conduct an interview. Formal interviews were conducted with ten of these participants in January and February 2004. Of the two remaining referrals, it turned out that one family was actually not in the district at the time of the neighborhood schools debate and the last parent agreed to participate but we were unable to schedule an interview in the end.

Based on how this first set of parents was successfully recruited, it quickly became clear that all study participants would likely be recruited in this same way - by group (i.e. suburban or city, Black or White) and as a result of personal contacts exclusively. This did in fact turn out to be the case with every participant interviewed. For case study research, this type of purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 1996) is warranted as long as researchers ensure that all groups that need to be included within the study are actually represented. Recruiting
participants in this manner was actually quite useful as a way to keep track of which groups of residents I had heard from and which ones still need to be recruited. For instance, this first set of parents interviewed were all White, suburban mothers, nine of whom supported the efforts to maintain Canton’s current student assignment plan, while only one participant was in support of neighborhood schools.

Following this first set of interviews, I sought to locate Black parents within the Canton community, which proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Recall that initial contacts with local community organizations did not result in the successful recruitment of any parents and a second visit to an elementary school PTA meeting resulted in only one participant. As a result, I developed two alternative strategies, which proved to be far more successful. The first group of Black participants interviewed was recruited from two local afterschool programs as they came to pick up their children after work. I would introduce myself, tell them about the study and ask if they would be interested in volunteering. Six of the seven women recruited through this method were interviewed in May 2004. Unfortunately, four of the interviews could not be used because once I actually began interviewing I discovered that although they lived in the community, none of their children were in school yet during the period under study and they were therefore unfamiliar with the NSA or the community’s response to it.

As a result, I needed to recruit another group of parents, which did not occur until February 2005. I went back to several of the Black educators I interviewed the summer before and asked for referrals given the difficulty I was having locating Black parents on my own. This strategy resulted in six referrals, four of who were actually interviewed. In total, seven interviews were conducted with nine Black participants. In one interview, both the
husband and wife were present and in another, the mother and grandmother were interviewed together. Three of these families live in the city, while four reside in suburban neighborhoods. Four of these families opposed neighborhood schools, two of the participants supported neighborhood schools, and one participant had no preference either way.

Much to my surprise, parents who supported neighborhood schools were also a bit difficult to find. The House Majority Leader who authored the NSA assured the Canton community that his constituents supported neighborhood schools and when interviewed for this study, reaffirmed his statement. After unsuccessfully trying to locate parents who supported the NSA, I contacted the legislator once again and asked for referrals as a way to meet with residents who supported the new law. Six families were identified and subsequently contacted by phone. Each of the parents contacted agreed to participate in the study and interviews were conducted in November 2004. Each of the participants interviewed were White, suburban parents. All but one of the families had their children in public schools, with one family reporting that their children have always been in private schools. Seven participants were interviewed overall - six of who were women and in one of the interviews, the husband was present as well. Although each of the seven parents interviewed were identified as neighborhood school supporters, one parent actually had no preference either way and throughout the interview, discussed the fact that she would have been satisfied regardless of whether the district returned to neighborhood schools or maintained their current student assignment plan.

Community leaders interviewed for the study were not recruited in the same way as other groups of participants; their recruitment was far more purposeful and targeted. Of the
four participants interviewed, each was deliberately chosen because of their role in the process. The two primary actors to be interviewed were the legislator who authored the NSA and the school board president who led the effort to prevent its implementation. I initially learned about the Canton community in the fall of 2002 when the board president presented their story at a conference I was attending. After her presentation, I introduced myself and discussed my interest in the current debate on desegregation policies in the United States. I immediately indicated that I’d be interested in exploring Canton’s story in depth and we discussed the possibility of doing so as my dissertation research. She agreed to assist me in any way possible which she continued to do throughout the development and implementation of this study. Our formal interview took place at her home in May of 2004.

I attempted to contact the state legislator by email and by phone initially and got no response. After speaking to his aide who suggested I contact him at his home office number, he agreed to participate in the study and the formal interview was conducted in March 2004 at a local coffee shop where he meets weekly with his constituents. The other two community leaders interviewed were also active in the neighborhood schools debate and were affiliated with local community organizations. I contacted the Canton Urban League (CUL) to ask if they had any involvement in this process and was referred to their education director who immediately agreed to participate. I interviewed him at his office on January 2004. Lastly, I contacted the co-chair of the Springdale Neighborhood Schools Committee (SNSC) as she also presented testimony on the impact of neighborhood schools at a Canton School Board meeting. This individual also heads a local community arts center and a charter school in the city. She agreed to participate and we conducted our interview in
March 2004 in two parts, by phone as she was driving in to meet with me and in person once she reached her office where I was waiting.

Canton educators were the last group to be recruited because there was some question as to whether I would be granted permission by the school district to go into the schools and recruit district employees. After meeting with the school district’s attorney to outline the parameters of my study, I was given a letter of permission to meet with employees. By then I was well into recruit parents and the school year was quickly coming to an end. Knowing firsthand how chaotic schools are toward the end of an academic year, I decided to wait until students were finished for the year and simply showed up on the doorstep of a number of schools throughout the community asking to speak with the principal. As it turned out, this strategy was very successful. After introducing myself and the study, several principals agreed to be interviewed on the spot, while one or two others had to be scheduled for a later date. Additionally, they were willing to refer several teachers who were in the district during the time the community responded to the NSA. In all, twelve interviews were conducted with educators from this community, most of which were conducted in person in June 2004. As a result of scheduling difficulties, two interviews were conducted by phone shortly after that, and the last interview was conducted in person in November 2004. Of the twelve educators interviewed, there were three principals, three assistant principals, and six teachers. Nine of the participants were women, three were men, four were Black, and there were eight Whites. All of the participants in this group were opposed to neighborhood schools. Additional demographic data was gathered on every participant in the study that included number of children, length of years in the district, marital status, level of education, household income, and employment status.
Data Analysis

Interviews with parents were conducted either in participants’ homes, in a study room at the local branch of the public library, or at their place of business and ranged in length from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. A semi-structured interview protocol was used which was designed to gather information about 1) their experiences within the district in general; 2) how they learned about the NSA and their opinion about the law; 3) their level of involvement in the district’s efforts to respond to the law; and 4) their perceptions of how others in the community viewed the law. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for data analysis. The transcriptions were coded utilizing the Constant Comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which allows the researcher to examine particular components of an interview and compare them with components of other interviews in an effort to identify categories that depict frequent patterns within the data. From the initial coding process, numerous patterns within the data began to emerge. Using the first several interviews as a guide, I identified and highlighted particular elements within the transcriptions, which although initially based on my interview protocol, began to take on a life of their own as participants responded in ways that could indeed be compared with one another. As anticipated, the elements that became visible early on were those that provided insight into why participants either opposed or supported neighborhood schools. As conversations turned toward their experience during this time, elements that had more to do specifically with how the community responded emerged in ways that provided an initial glimpse into what took place within Canton.

After conducting the first set of interviews and initial coding of that data, it became clear that additional areas needed to be probed with participants; in fact, this occurred after
each set of interviews. While having the flexibility to continually construct the protocol in this way is especially useful and a clear benefit of qualitative research, I discovered that it created a bit of difficulty in terms of continuity because I did not go back and re-interview previous participants to ask questions which emerged as a result of initial coding. Moreover, some of the questions that arose as a result were specifically geared toward particular groups and were therefore not explored with other participant groups. For instance, exploring whether or not there were visible leaders within the Black community during this process did not emerge as an area to probe until well into the data analysis process and was therefore not examined from other perspectives (i.e. community leaders and educators).

Upon a secondary sequence of coding, the researcher was able to identify several broad themes from which to present and interpret the data utilizing the theoretical frameworks outlined in the review of literature. Data analysis was further conducted during regular meetings with my committee chair who would assist in this process by identifying areas in need of further clarification and coding as themes were discussed and examined in greater detail.

**Issues of Validity and Reliability**

In his discussion of validity in qualitative research, Maxwell (1996) writes that validity refers “to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 87). He suggests that qualitative researchers typically use this basic definition of validity as they seek to ensure that their studies are indeed credible to readers and fellow researchers alike. Merriam (1998) notes, “the applied nature of educational inquiry thus makes it imperative that researchers and others have confidence in the conduct of the investigation and in the results of any particular study” (p.
Simply put, validity in qualitative research is concerned with how well the study accurately represents or captures what it is claiming to examine. Additionally, threats to the validity of a study can occur in several ways, each of which must be adequately addressed to assure that research is trustworthy. Fortunately, qualitative researchers agree that there are a number of strategies one can employ to deal with these various threats to validity. Several of these strategies have been used in the current study and will be presented below.

**Internal Validity**

Internal validity specifically addresses whether or not the researcher’s presentation of results represents the true meaning of what was being studied. This is particularly important because in most cases, qualitative studies seek to examine individuals or groups in natural settings where the meaning participants assign to their lives and to the events taking place around them are critical to one’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. It would be difficult for instance to accurately portray the reality of living in a homeless shelter without truly understanding how residents define their worlds and construct meanings of their experiences within such settings. In the current study of the process that took place within Canton as they responded to the neighborhood schools law, residents surely experienced this process in different ways depending on where they were situated within it. Capturing the true meaning that parents, educators, and community leaders attach to their experiences during this time is essential if we are to fully understand what took place in this community.

In an effort to enhance the internal validity of this case study, I employed several strategies identified within the qualitative research literature. The first strategy used was triangulation, the use of multiple sources of data to confirm what the researcher is actually discovering. Mathison as quoted in Merriam (1998) notes that triangulation should be used
to gain “a holistic understanding of the situation” so that researchers can develop reasonable explanations about the topic under study (p.204). As noted, the primary method of data collection was participant interviews with parents, educators, and community leaders who were living and/or working in the Canton School District during the time the community responded to the NSA. Secondary sources of data were subsequently used to determine the accuracy of what participants reported which included archived newspaper articles and personal correspondences about the NSA and about the process that occurred as a result of the law’s passage.

A second strategy used to enhance the internal validity in this case was what Merriam refers to as peer examinations, the practice of asking colleagues to review the data and provide feedback on the results. I asked my host, an accomplished researcher with an MSW and Ph.D. in social work from the University of Pennsylvania to review the raw data. She was given several non-identifiable transcriptions from each participant group and asked to provide feedback on what she understood as the reasons participants gave for choosing to oppose or support neighborhood schools and their perceptions of how the community became mobilized to challenge the NSA. This was followed by a phone conference to review her perceptions of participant responses in each of these areas.

Lastly, issues of internal validity were addressed using member checks, the process of “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Two participants from each group were asked to review a narrative summary of the results from their respective groups to determine whether or not I realistically captured the essence of what participants shared about the process in Canton. Narratives were emailed to participants as attachments.
with the exception of one parent who wanted his copy sent through the U.S. postal service.

Participants were given approximately two weeks to read these summaries and respond with feedback. Each of these strategies served to increase the internal validity of this research by allowing for the confirmation of specific interpretations in some cases and the questioning of others by those who disagreed.

*External Validity*

External validity refers to the extent that the results of a study can be applied to other situations (Merriam, 1998, p. 207). Normally a critical component of quantitative research studies, qualitative researchers think about this type of validity in a slightly different way. Although the results of qualitative research are typically not meant to be generalizable to other settings, there are several ways that a study such as this can be useful for others, particularly as other school districts continue to be faced with similar situations. Maxwell (1996) presents several points concerning generalizability that are significant for this particular study, noting that among other things, there are factors that can provide a certain “reasonableness” to the kinds of inferences drawn from qualitative studies. Such factors include “respondents’ own assessments of generalizability, the similarity of dynamics and constraints to other situations, the presumed depth of universality of the phenomenon studied, and corroboration from other studies” (p. 97). It is reasonable to assume that the experiences with desegregation in Canton may be similar to other school districts given the number of court ordered desegregation plans that were implemented throughout the nation during the 1960s and 70s. This is fully in line with Merriam’s (1988) contention that the value of a case study is in large part up to the reader who extrapolates information that is useful to them. Readers determine what components of the study are applicable to their situations and which
do not apply (p. 177). We know that since the early 1990s, there has been an increase in the number of districts facing the reversal of desegregation plans (Orfield & Eaton, 1996) and several of these districts may be thinking about ways to block such efforts. There is much to learn from a community that has successfully faced this kind of challenge.

Researcher Bias

A critical element of enhancing validity within qualitative research is the idea of addressing the researcher’s own bias. Researchers generally choose a topic of study because of an inherent interest in it, which surely means that we have given the topic some thought. Moreover, as objective as we may try to be, we often have a definite opinion about the subject we are seeking to explore. A researcher’s own perspective must therefore be taken into consideration throughout the development, implementation, and final presentation of the research itself. Maxwell (1996) argues that we should not attempt to eliminate such bias, but instead understand “how a particular researcher’s values influence the conduct and conclusions of the study” (p.91). Upon deciding to conduct a case study on the process that took place within the Canton community, I immediately recognized the inherent bias I had against residents who supported neighborhood schools given my strong commitment to ensuring equity within public education and made a point of trying to remain open to the idea to learn why residents might be inclined to choose such a plan. I must admit, that it didn’t take long for me to understand the rationale behind such a decision and to also admit that if I were a parent in the Canton community, I might struggle with issue of neighborhood schools myself. As a result of this level of self-reflection about my own views on desegregation and biases toward those who don’t appear to support such a concept, I was able to remain open enough to interview all participants with the same degree of engagement and respect.
However, I would submit that interpreting participants’ responses and presenting those interpretations objectively were more difficult for me to do. There were times where I found myself becoming a bit critical of a participant’s response for instance and struggled to try to keep that out of my writing. I am not quite sure how successful I have been at that task and suspect that there might be places where readers may pick up on some of this struggle.

Reliability

One final area we must address as researchers is the reliability of one’s study. Reliability is concerned with how well the study can be duplicated and is particularly troublesome in qualitative research where what is under study - people in natural settings for example, is not a static concept and therefore cannot be studied in exactly the same way at a different point in time. Furthermore, the design of the study itself is often developed so that it captures the phenomena in the present moment or in a specific moment in time. Given the nature of qualitative research, the question is not necessarily whether if conducted again, the results would be the same, rather it is a question of whether the current results make sense given the data that was collected. Reliability in qualitative research is seeking to enhance the consistency and dependability of the actual study (Merriam, 1998, p. 206). The methods of triangulation described above were also used in this case study to address issues of reliability.

Presentation of Results

As the interviews were coded and analyzed, various themes began to emerge from within the data. These themes emerged in two primary areas, the reasons participants chose to oppose or support neighborhood schools and the way in which they became mobilized to do so. I will refer to these themes as the motivation and the process from this point forward. Within these themes, a number of smaller categories were visible which will be presented
throughout the results section. Given that there were several different participant groups, the themes will also be presented from the perspective of each of those groups. Readers should note several important considerations. First, some participant groups included members of one racial group only (i.e. Black parents), while others include a combination of racial groups (i.e. educators). Moreover, some of the groups included a combination of opponents and supporters of the NSA, while other groups were made up entirely of either opponents or supporters. Therefore the presentation of themes may not occur in exactly the same manner depending on which participant group the focus is on at any point in time. Secondly, every participant group did not offer substantive feedback on each category within the larger themes. In cases where there were no responses from a particular group on an issue, I simply omitted any discussion of that group in general. For instance, there were several topics that were addressed by parents or educators specifically that community leaders did not comment on at all. Finally, readers should note that in an effort to provide a certain amount of continuity or focus to the study, I have included specific quotes from participants, which depict the perceptions of a particular participant group as a whole. While there were literally dozens of quotes that are either very powerful or reflect a slight difference in perspective within a group, I chose not to include them for the sake of brevity.
CHAPTER 4

Welcome to Canton

The Canton School District is located within the Springdale Metropolitan area, a moderate size city situated along the eastern seaboard. Like many urban centers across the country, particularly those in the northern region of the United States, Springdale is made up of an inner city community surrounded by several suburban neighborhoods. The Canton School District, along with several neighboring districts, has a significant history of desegregation litigation. The following chapter will provide readers with an introduction to the community of Canton and to those who live and work within it. We will begin with an overview of Springdale’s desegregation history, followed by a presentation of the current demographic make up within the Canton community itself. The chapter will conclude with a snapshot of what readers will hear from study participants throughout the next several chapters as they discuss their experiences during the time the community responded to the NSA.

The Desegregation of Springdale

Springdale is located within what many refer to as a “border state” as it is situated between the northern and southern portions of the U.S. Although there were traces of the types of values generally embraced by the north, the politics of the state most resembled those of the old south as its neighborhoods and schools remained significantly segregated by race (Ehrlander, 2002). The growth of suburbanization, particularly within the Springdale area, was a significant factor in creating and maintaining high levels of residential segregation, as was the case in many metropolitan areas in the north. Raffel (1980) notes that
during the two and a half decades between 1950 and 1975 “the percentage of blacks in the city increased from 7.6 to 55.5 percent, while in the suburbs, the black population dropped from 16.1 to 3.9” (p. 15). In this metropolitan area, the city of Springdale was populated by large numbers of minority and lower income residents, while the make up of the suburbs consisted predominately of wealthy White residents.

Prior to *Brown*, public school segregation, specifically in the Springdale area within the northern region of the state, was being challenged. As a result, two specific cases were actually included in the larger *Brown* suit. These cases originated in suburban communities, which bordered the city of Springdale. Several years after that decision, a third case was introduced which challenged segregation in the southern portion of the state (Raffel, 1980). In 1957, despite the fact that after *Brown* the state was required to desegregate its schools, the federal district court found that the State Board of Education had not met its obligation to develop plans which desegregated all of the state’s public schools and ordered them to comply at once. By 1967, all of the state’s schools had “officially” been desegregated and it became the first southern or border state to desegregate its public schools (Ehrlander, 2002, p. 42).

Despite having declared that schools throughout the state were desegregated, this was in fact not the case and inequities continued to persist. In 1968 the General Assembly approved a plan called the Educational Advancement Act (EAA) which resulted in the consolidation of several outlying school districts, and the explicit exclusion of the city of Springdale (Raffel, 1980). Based on the demographics during this period, it was clear that schools within the city could not possibly be desegregated as claimed once the act was passed. Again, Black parents filed suit as they argued that the EAA maintained dual school
systems, and that the Springdale system was inferior to the one in the surrounding suburbs. In 1974, the U.S. District Court agreed, noting that segregation was never eradicated in the urban schools and ordered the state to develop new desegregation plans (Ehrlander, 2002). Within the next two years, the court rejected several plans submitted by the state and the U.S. Supreme Court denied the state’s appeal.

In July of 1978, a District Court Judge approved a plan designed by a five-member board he assembled to address the issue of desegregating the area’s schools. The plan called for the consolidation of the city of Springdale with the 10 surrounding suburban communities into one large metropolitan school district, which would be known as the Greene County School District. City students were to attend suburban schools for 9 years, and suburban students were to attend city schools for 3 years (Raffel, 1980). The judge exempted kindergarten and special education students from the plan, allowing those groups to remain in their neighborhood schools. As predicted, there was major opposition to such a plan as local and state politicians called for appeals and urged suburban White residents to voice their opposition as loudly as possible. Committees and community groups were created on both sides and the battle began. Additionally, several local business leaders began to meet in secret to devise strategies to implement the judge’s order peacefully, vowing not to have the same type of unrest the country had witnessed in other cities.

In the interim, the Court of Appeals denied the state’s appeal, and therefore the judge’s plan remained intact. Despite this loss, school board members, community members, and politicians who opposed the plan refused to shift their focus and participate in the development of the implementation phase of this order, even when invited by the judge to do so (Ehrlander, 2002). Ultimately, this proved to be a critical mistake on their part.
Opponents of the new plan relied on the fact that based on the 1974 Supreme Court decision in *Milliken*, creating a metropolitan district in the Springdale area would never be permitted by the courts. The *Milliken* decision ruled that the city of Detroit could not be combined with its surrounding suburbs for the purposes of desegregation, which effectively shut off the use of creating metropolitan districts as remedies. Local and state politicians in this case however, did not count on the fact that the court noted a fundamental difference between the two cases. Unlike the Detroit case, in this case, the court found that “previous to Brown, the city and suburbs had cooperatively participated in *de jure* segregation” (Ehrlander, 2002). A metropolitan remedy is not warranted when suburban communities have not participated in creating or maintaining residential segregation, but it is certainly reasonable when the implementation of governmental housing and zoning policies, for instance, have resulted in a high degree of segregation as was the case in this instance. Despite all of the efforts to prevent the creation of a metropolitan school district, the order would stand and in September of 1978, over a third of the district’s 63,540 students were reassigned and peacefully bused to new schools with virtually no input by those who had so vehemently opposed the plan. Opponents had miscalculated the outcome of this battle, losing out on any chance to assist in the development of specific implementation strategies and simultaneously alienating their minority constituents (Ehrlander, 2002).

Once again, the state became a key state within the desegregation battle as this decision made it the first state to have a court mandated metropolitan desegregation plan. As a result of the judge’s ruling, Raffel (1980) offers that Springdale “became something of a proving ground for proponents and opponents alike” and garnered the attention of an entire nation (p. 3). He also points out that ironically enough, as much of the country viewed the
ruling as a victory for desegregation, this step proved to be somewhat costly to Black leaders. Prior to that, they had little to no political power throughout the state. As a result of the demographic changes that occurred in the region, however, Blacks had managed to take control of the school district and other aspects of political life in Springdale. The district superintendent, along with the majority of school board members and building principals were all Black. Creating a metropolitan school district resulted in the loss of key administrative and school board positions for this group, positions they fought hard to attain.

Although desegregation moved forward in the Springdale area, there continued to be dissatisfaction among many of its residents. Black parents in particular were unhappy about the lengthy bus rides their children were forced to take and the idea that their students had to be bused for nine years, while White students only had to leave their neighborhoods for three (Ehrlander, 2002). In 1981, as a result of a significant level of frustration about the implementation of the judge’s plan and the large size of the metropolitan school district, the district was divided into four smaller, more manageable school districts. The four new districts became known as Canton, Smithville, Davis, and Duncan. Each of these districts has remained to this day and includes a portion of the surrounding suburbs and a portion of the city of Springdale. There is one additional district, along with a portion of another, which were not included in the reorganization. The Bedford School District and a small section of the Salem School District are in the southern regions of the county and serve the more rural areas within it. For these reasons, neither of these districts is considered to be within the metropolitan area of the city of Springdale and have therefore generally been excluded from the ongoing desegregation litigation despite being part of the county itself.
The Trend Toward Resegregation

For nearly twenty years, the configuration of the school districts in Greene County as described remained unchallenged, but all of that would change as the 20th century came to a close. Despite the reorganization of the districts and a long-standing desegregation plan, conflicts continued to emerge within the county. Erhlander (2002) notes that by 1995, the four districts had a student enrollment of nearly fifty thousand students, with 31% of those being Black (p. 63). She goes on to point out that although significant inequalities between the districts did not persist as a result of the inclusion of Springdale within each, and there were minimal financial worries because the state had been ordered to contribute a large share of the funding necessary for these districts, concerns about public schooling in the county persisted. Most notably, concerns were raised about the ever present achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts and the perception that many parents wanted their children to return to schools within their own communities. Each of these concerns appears to be useful to those who for years have argued that desegregation plans have not been successful; many of who also lobby for local control, school choice, and a return to neighborhood schools. Together with the increasing trend of the courts to grant school districts unitary status, thereby ending judicial oversight of court ordered desegregation plans, it seems that in Greene County, the foundation was set for opponents to petition the court to end their desegregation plan as well.

In 1995, as a result of a petition filed by the State Board of Education two years earlier, the U.S. District Court lifted the desegregation order for Greene County schools (Doorey & Harter, 2003). Interestingly enough, however, there were no major changes in any of the four districts once the court lifted the desegregation order. Doorey & Harter
(2003) point out that, “Given the lack of racial and socioeconomic integration within neighborhoods, school boards were reluctant to draw new attendance lines that would resegregate the area’s schools” (p. 23). In 1997, the district adopted what became known as the Post Desegregation Reconfiguration Plan, which was based on “geographic distance, natural boundaries of neighborhoods and other factors, including the racial composition of the schools” (The Canton School District, 2001).

It was not until three years later that business as usual within the county would be disrupted. On April 20, 2000, the state passed the Neighborhood Schools Law, which stated that factors such as race could not be considered in student assignment patterns. Sponsored by the Republican House Majority Leader, the new law ordered all four of the districts – Canton, Smithville, Davis, and Duncan to develop new attendance plans based on geographic distance only. Canton, feeling pressured to provide both equitable educational opportunities for all of its students and to comply with the new law went several steps further. The school board felt strongly that a return to neighborhood schools would result in racial and economic resegregation given that residential integration within the community had never occurred. Nevertheless, they also understood that many parents wanted their children to return to schools in their own neighborhood (Doorey & Harter, 2003). Perhaps most importantly, borrowing a concept from one particular theory of leadership, the school board decided that the Canton community needed to be involved in the dialogue, which ultimately set the stage for the series of events that followed.

**Community Mobilization**

The school board began what can best be described as a campaign of sorts which essentially challenged the community to “do the right thing” by all students. As Doorey &
Harter (2003) put it, “People would naturally focus on the impact on their own children, it was argued, unless given the opportunity and responsibility to review the larger implications” (p. 23). Thus the board’s strategy was to develop several plans for neighborhood schools, along with the financial and educational implications of each, and let the community decide for themselves whether to choose one of those plans, or challenge neighborhood schools and petition to continue their current feeder patterns. Before holding a special vote for the general public, the board implemented a series of activities designed to provide as much information as possible to community members. Experts were brought in to present research on the effects of re-creating high poverty schools and to elaborate on the kinds of additional resources the district would need to provide for students in these schools. Additionally, district staff developed a specific budget for these services, which included funds to “recruit and retain quality teachers, provide smaller class sizes, extend learning opportunities and bolster student and family support” (p.24). The financial implication of providing the newly required services for the entire community was also outlined. All of this information was disseminated in a voter’s guide that was sent to each household and a television special that also included this information was aired at several different times on the local cable station. Finally, a local parent created a community organization dedicated to ensuring that diversity remain a priority in the schools, which gained support from an editorial written in the area newspaper along with several other articles.

The results from the public vote, held on October 30, 2001, provided overwhelming evidence that the Canton community placed a high value on issues of equity and diversity as nearly 70% of those who voted did so in favor of maintaining the current student assignment plan. In compliance with the law, the district did submit a neighborhood schools plan based
on zip codes, but also requested that they be allowed to continue with their current plan, citing the research on high poverty schools and the financial implications for the community itself.

After a special hearing held on February 26, 2002 designed to give community members a final chance to voice their concerns, the state board of education granted the district permission to maintain the current feeder patterns as their neighborhood schools plan in the spring of 2002 (Doorey & Harter, 2003). In the face of mounting national and state pressure to return to neighborhood schools under the guise of retaining local control, it is clear that the Canton community, although prompted by the local school board, made a conscious decision to put the needs of all of its children first. It seems that this community rose to the occasion and indeed did the right thing, which resulted in ensuring access to quality education for all students, particularly for those children who are often left behind. The decision to truly engage the public, along with the subsequent events that took place in Canton as they actively challenged the Neighborhood Schools Act serves as the basis for this case study.

The People and Places of Canton

The following section will provide an overview of several aspects of the Canton community. Readers will first be given the current demographics of Canton’s residents followed by a description of the layout of the community itself.

Residential Demographics

Greene County, which houses the four school districts involved in desegregation litigation, is the northern most county within the state. It is also the largest of the counties with a population of just over 500,000 residents as well as the wealthiest with a median
household income of $52,000, which is slightly above the average household income for the state. According to the most recent census data, Greene County is approximately 73% White, 20% Black, 5% Latino, and 3% Asian (2000 Census). Within the county, the demographics within the Springdale metropolitan area have not changed significantly since the court first implemented desegregation in the 1970s. The city of Springdale itself is 35.5% White, 56.4% Black, 9.8% Latino, and 0.7% Asian. When taken together we note that about two-thirds of Springdale’s residents are people of color, while the majority of Whites reside in the surrounding suburban neighborhoods. Data also shows that approximately 66% of the households within the city have an annual income of less than $50,000, with the majority of that population (36.5%) earning below $25,000 per year (2000 Census). From this, we can see that Springdale resembles any number of cities throughout the country where high levels of racial and economic residential segregation continue to be the norm.

Of the four school districts originally ordered to desegregate, Canton is the second smallest with an enrollment of just over 10,000 students. Current statistics report that the student population is 56% White, 37.2% Black, 2.9% Latino, and 3.7% Asian. For this study, the focus will only be on Black and White families, given the small percentages of Asian and Latino students within the district. Based on the statistics above, readers will note that the majority of Black students within the Canton School District clearly come from lower income families who reside within the city limits, while the majority of White students come from middle to upper income families who live in the surrounding suburban communities.
**The Canton Landscape**

One of the first things you notice upon driving through the suburban portion of the Canton community is that it is divided up into a large number of smaller developments, each consisting of several blocks of homes. Every one of these developments is named and signs are quite visible so that one knows almost immediately whether you are entering Forest Hills or Glenwood Park. Upon arriving in town during my first visit, I took the exit from the highway and headed directly into Canton Ridge, the wealthiest suburban neighborhood within the district. As I drove along the tree-lined streets admiring the homes I passed, noticing the names of the various developments within Canton Ridge, I remember thinking that it was such a lovely area. Many of the sections within Canton Ridge have homes that were built fairly recently and are without a doubt the most exclusive areas within the community, while other sections are clearly older but still very well maintained. The few residents visible during my drive are all White, many of them women who are obviously home during the day. There is also no shortage of signs directing visitors and residents to various schools and swim clubs within the community. The commercial areas within Canton Ridge are easily accessible to residents and consist of several major streets, which house everything from the public library to stores, restaurants, gas stations and the like. The largest of these streets, which after several miles in one direction actually takes you out of town, could almost be called a mini highway given the volume of traffic on it. This road houses an enormous number of businesses, strip malls, and the one large shopping mall in the area. If you follow this road in the other direction, it leads directly into the center of the city as well.

As my host drove me around the area for a tour, we headed toward the school district offices, where I quickly realized that we were entering a different part of the suburbs.
Deerwood is much more of a working class community where the homes are smaller and closer together, but still well cared for. This community is also divided into smaller developments. During later visits to Deerwood on my own, I subsequently located the lower income sections of this particular area, where apartment complexes and commercial businesses dominate the landscape. There are several parks and community centers within the area and signs pointing to the various schools are clearly visible here as well. Deerwood is more racially integrated than Canton Ridge, as White, Black, and Latino residents live in fairly close proximity to one another.

Finally, there is the city of Springdale itself, which includes the downtown commercial area, a more industrial area just outside of that, and the various residential neighborhoods that surround the city’s immediate center. There were three things immediately noticeable as I drove through the city. First, there is the fact that the city is literally only a four-minute drive from some of the most expensive sections of Canton Ridge. Secondly, I noticed that the neighborhood you encounter upon arriving in the city from the suburbs is a working class area where residents own single or twin homes, which are also well maintained. Although most of the residents I see during this drive are Black there are several Whites who live there as well. Third, there are no developments with charming little names in this community. My first reaction to all of this was one of shock as I realized both how close these neighborhoods were to each other and how nice this part of the city actually was given the fact that I heard about suburban parents who were afraid to send their children into the city for grades 4 through 6. Two of the three schools for these grades are located right in this particular section of the community. My second reaction was to wonder whether
these parents had actually ever been to this part of town to see for themselves how stable the community seemed to be.

Given what I had seen up to this point, I was very curious to find the lower income sections of the city, so I followed a bus filled with Black students from a school in the suburbs to see where they were dropped off. The ride was no more than fifteen minutes or so, and the first stop was definitely in the neighborhood I was looking for. As you drive further into the heart of the city, you cross two large streets that house most of the commercial businesses, fast food chains, several churches, and the public library. Right on the other side of these streets is where the lower income Black community begins. It is also where the bus first stopped to let off more than half of its student passengers. This neighborhood is dominated by streets that are crowded with row homes and littered with various types of trash typical of most lower income urban areas. Contrary to all of the other communities I toured, there were plenty of residents out and about, standing around chatting on their steps or near the corner stores that populate the community. In short, it is what I expected to see when I heard about suburban parents’ hesitation to bus their children into the city.

Canton’s Schools

There are seventeen public K-12 schools within the Canton School District which are divided into four grade compositions: eight K-3rd grade schools (elementary), three 4th-6th grade schools (intermediate), three 7th-8th grade schools (middle), and three 9th-12th grade schools (high). The majority of these schools are located outside of the central city area in the surrounding suburban neighborhoods. There are four schools located within the city of Springdale, three located within Deerwood, and ten located in the Canton Ridge area. Two
of the three high schools are located in Canton Ridge, while the third is in an area that is technically within the city limits, but on the outskirts of it. Two of the three 4th-6th grade schools are as noted located in the central city section (one block from each other actually), while the 3rd school is in the Deerwood community. Readers should note the significance of where these particular schools are located because much of the debate around neighborhood schools is about the fact that there are no schools located in certain areas of the community.

As I continued my tour of the neighborhoods and began searching for each of the schools, I was instantly struck by where they were located. Many of the schools are tucked away in residential areas within the developments and are easily found only because of the numerous signs letting people know exactly where they are. Even the district’s central offices are located within one of these residential areas in the Deerwood section of the community. The second thing I noticed upon finding each of the schools was the condition they were in. Canton’s schools are in particularly good shape inside and out. While several of the buildings have undergone major renovations in recent years, even those that haven’t been renovated are well maintained and in good condition. Once inside, the schools and classrooms are brightly lit cheerful places where the walls are adorned with plenty of student work, posters, awards and an assortment of other decorations. The schools also seem to be bustling with activity, as there always seems to be a band concert, sporting event, or parent activity occurring.

Although most of the schools in the lower grades occupy small buildings, there is one school that seems to be talked about a great deal within the community. Evergreen is one of the two intermediate schools located in the city and is a very large, majestic old brick building. As it turns out, Evergreen used to be a high school and despite recent renovations,
continues to look rather imposing upon first sight. Since its transition to a 4th-6th grade building, each floor of the school has been divided up into wings, each with their own administrative and teaching staff. Clearly these renovations were designed to create smaller spaces to house younger children given the overwhelming size of the building. In spite of the district’s efforts to restructure the building in a way that allows students to remain in their assigned wings without having to wander through the entire building, White suburban parents in particular often continue to raise concerns about the size of the actual building and the large number of students (approximately 1000) who attend school there. Neither of these factors is viewed as conducive to learning and therefore inappropriate for children that young. Throughout the study, I continued to hear that as a result, many parents place their children in the private school system for those three intermediate years of school. Additional comments about this very common practice suggest that the location of the school (in the city) also plays into the decision to move children during that period of time. With this in mind, readers can anticipate that the story of Canton is a fascinating one to be sure.

*The Voices of Canton*

Throughout the next several chapters, readers will hear directly from Canton’s residents as they share their thoughts and feelings about the process that took place within their community as the district responded to the NSA. As mentioned, the results of this case study will be presented thematically in an effort to allow readers to fully understand both the reasons participants offered for choosing to either support or oppose the NSA, as well as their perspectives about how this all came about. In the current section, however, I will provide a brief snapshot of what is to come as Canton’s story unfolds.
Essentially, there were four sets of participants who opposed the NSA, but readers should take note that within one of those participant groups - Black parents, there were some exceptions. Within the first group of opponents - White suburban parents, we will learn that there were actually two distinct subgroups. While some of these participants opposed the NSA from the start, others shifted their opinion only after they learned more about it. Either way, this group reports that they were concerned about the impact of a neighborhood schools law on lower income children of color and about the lack of diversity that would result from such a law. They also raised additional concerns about more concrete issues such as the cost of returning to neighborhood schools, and felt quite empowered to speak out against the NSA.

All but two of the Black parents interviewed opposed the NSA regardless of whether they resided in the city or the surrounding suburbs. While they gave the same reasons as White suburban opponents for opposing the law, these participants presented additional concerns that are unique to families of color within the Canton community and noted that the impact of the NSA would be far more detrimental to their own children. For instance they point out that it is more difficult for Black families to choose a side in this debate because regardless of which side they chose, their children will lose something in the process – namely a sense of community or academic quality.

The two Black participants who supported the neighborhood schools law did so primarily because they believe that it builds community and offers Black students a sense of belonging in a way that schools outside of one’s own neighborhood cannot provide. Regardless of their position on neighborhood schools, however, perhaps the most notable
aspect about this participant group was their lack of organized activity and leadership during this process.

Among Canton’s educators, all of whom opposed the NSA, issues of equity were most salient as they viewed neighborhood schools as a step backwards to a time when schools were legally segregated by race. They also provided critical insight into where parents were situated within this process, recalling which groups were particularly active versus those who were virtually silent on the issue of neighborhood schools. Finally, three of the four community leaders interviewed firmly believed that neighborhood schools would result in high levels of racial and economic resegregation within the district. While obviously in agreement with other participant groups who opposed the NSA, community leaders had far more to say about the actual process that took place within Canton than other groups, pointing out the highly political nature of it in general. Given their position as leaders, this group was able to offer insights into the process that parents and educators simply could not provide. On the other side of the issue, however, the community leader who actually sponsored the NSA presented that the law was designed to win back private school parents who have chosen to vote with their feet and to provide more attractive public school options for companies looking to relocate their employees within the Canton area. Essentially he offers community development as the primary rationale for a return to neighborhood schools.

The last group of participants, parents who supported neighborhood schools, had a great deal to say about why they supported the NSA, beginning with the idea that it builds community and leads to increased levels of parent involvement. Moreover they argue that once the NSA was passed, the district had a responsibility to adhere to the law rather than
trying to find ways to get around it. Lastly, and perhaps most significant, neighborhood school supporters offer a particularly insightful response regarding their own level of inactivity during the time the community responded to the NSA, despite their level of organization when it came to ensuring the law’s initial passage. Their admitted level of inactivity proved to be a critical component of the Canton story.

Clearly what has been presented is only a glimpse of what participants in this study address as they shared their perceptions regarding the process that took place within Canton. Responding to the neighborhood schools law was in many ways a very contentious situation for this small community as the various factions drew lines in the sand and prepared for the struggle that was all too imminent. While we know that the final outcome was the continuance of Canton’s current system of student assignment, taking a closer look at precisely why and how this community was able to make that happen is well worth the trip. In the following chapters, readers will hear from the people of Canton in their own words. It is my hope that what you hear will stimulate your thinking and raise additional questions about what is best for all of our young people as we continue to seek ways to provide equal educational opportunities within public education.

Several broad themes emerged from the data as I explored how the Canton community became organized to challenge a law calling for a return to neighborhood schools. Throughout data analysis, it became clear that these themes were coming to light within two natural categories. The first set of themes to appear addressed the specific reasons Canton residents either supported or opposed the NSA and essentially explain the motivation behind their decisions to do so. Simply put, these themes give readers the why of the story. The second set of themes to emerge during analysis were those that address the
actual process that took place as the Canton community responded to the new law thereby providing us with the how of the story.

In the following chapters, results of this study will be presented within this context as we begin to examine what conditions must be present for a community to successfully prevent a return to neighborhood schools despite a state mandate calling for them to do so. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will present findings specifically related to the motivation of Canton’s residents during this period. For instance in Chapter 5, issues of equity and diversity, primary concerns for opponents of the NSA will be explored, while Chapter 6 presents the secondary reasons opponents gave for opposing the NSA, such as the costs and disruption of moving to neighborhood schools. Chapter 7 explores the issues that were important to neighborhood school supporters, namely community building and increasing parental involvement. Chapter 8 will address the actual process that unfolded within the community as they responded to the NSA. Despite the similarity of responses generated from the various participant groups as they discuss their reasons for supporting or opposing the NSA, and the process of doing so as they experienced it, there are some critical differences between them that reveal the true complexity of this story.
CHAPTER 5

Doing the Right Thing

There were two primary themes that emerged during data collection, both of which are related to doing what’s best for Canton’s students. Specifically, opponents of the NSA addressed issues of equity and opportunities for diversity as they discussed their feelings about the neighborhood schools law and their reasons for opposing it. Each of these concerns will be presented in depth throughout this chapter. Additionally, while not cited as primary concerns, neighborhood school supporters will share their perceptions about each of these issues as well.

*It Wasn’t Equal Then*

One of the most powerful themes to emerge from these interviews was the idea of equity as participants discussed their feelings about the NSA and what they understood as the consequences of its implementation. The most notable aspect of these conversations was the level of concern displayed by opponents of neighborhood schools for children other than their own. Within these discussions, parents, educators, and community leaders alike most often used the word resegregation as they shared their feelings about the NSA. Those who knew from the start that they did not support neighborhood schools articulated notions of equity most strongly, pointing to the fact that a return to such schools would result in overwhelming numbers of lower income students of color attending schools in the city where they live, while wealthier White children would remain in the suburban schools. Others shifted their opinion about neighborhood schools after learning more about the implications of doing so for Canton’s students. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, readers will
hear from each participant group as they share their reasons for choosing to either oppose or support a return to neighborhood schools.

**Suburban Consciousness and Resistance**

White suburban parents who opposed the NSA can be grouped into two distinct segments. There were those participants who opposed the law from the beginning, either prior to its passage or soon afterwards. The second group of participants were those who initially supported the idea of neighborhood schools and changed their minds only after they were presented with the financial and educational implications of such a plan.

**Initial opposition**

Among suburban White parents who opposed the NSA, those who had been especially active in the school district and therefore had greater access to district administrators, to research on public schools, and to educational policy networks had an immediate understanding of the impact of neighborhood schools on certain populations. Participants from this group who were particularly active in efforts to prevent neighborhood schools were, as expected, the most vocal critics of the law and the implications of it. Discussing her reasons for not supporting neighborhood schools, one of these parents noted,

> With my policy hat on, you know the research is all out there saying if you create these high poverty schools, you’re going to have problems. …Educationally, it doesn’t make sense, its not going to be good for our district to do that…for the education of our students.

For this parent, access to knowledge about the effects of creating high poverty schools prior to the time this research was disseminated throughout the community allowed her to take an active role in the process very early on.
On the other end of the spectrum, a parent with very little involvement in the process also voiced some particularly strong feelings about her reasons for not supporting a return to neighborhood schools saying,

It frightens me when they talk about neighborhood schools and thinking of children from poor backgrounds all being in the same schools all together…the teachers, the resources…that would upset me just to think about it. I just think it would segregate the schools back to the way it was a long time ago and I just think that is sad because regardless…going all the way back, equal is never equal….you know, it can be separate but it’s never going to be equal.

Based on the mention of teachers and resources, one can assume that despite the lower level of involvement of this parent, she has some knowledge of the consequences of segregated schools. The Education Trust, a Washington, DC based policy organization argues that children in high poverty, high minority schools typically have a higher percentage of under qualified teachers (Haycock, 1998). In a report for the National Center For Education Statistics (NCES), Lippman, Burns, & McArthur (1996) report, “Higher concentrations of poverty in schools had a consistent and pervasive relationship to poorer quality resources and staff” (p. 81). Much of the literature on school quality and student achievement provides evidence of those consequences indeed. But perhaps what is most striking in this parent’s comments is her emotional reaction to this idea. As a researcher, what resonated for me was her use of the word “frighten” as she explains her feelings, particularly because as a suburban parent, a neighborhood schools plan would have far less effect on her own child. Clearly, this parent has strong feelings about the welfare of all children and seems to worry that
Canton would be turning back the clock to the pre-Brown era, thereby consigning certain children to a life with very limited opportunities.

Another parent addressed what she saw as the unfairness of the new law and seemed to be questioning the ethics of those behind its creation. Discussing the three different neighborhood school plans the district proposed as required by the law, she pointed to what she viewed as the confusion these plans created, and voiced her rationale for not supporting any of them, noting,

Yeah, they were crazy…and then you had this one group where all of these lower income kids would be pooled into this one giant area and…well, it’s so unfair to these kids and you are going to do this? How can you do this…and sleep?

All of the parents in this first group, those who opposed the NSA from the start had similar reactions to it, pointing specifically to the inequities it would create between schools in the city versus those in the suburban neighborhoods. For these parents, there was never a question about their decision as they sought to maintain Canton’s current student assignment plan.

*The devil is in the details*

While there were White suburban residents who opposed the NSA from the start, others as I have noted did not share those feelings. Several parents interviewed initially supported the law and only shifted their opinion after being presented with the research circulated by the school district at meetings, through the voter’s guide, and through other means of communication. For these parents, feelings about resegregation were also at the heart of this shift. As one parent put it, “It was hard to attend a meeting, hear all of the evidence put forth, and continue to support neighborhood schools”. This seems to be the
case indeed as several parents discussed their change of opinion with me. In a discussion about why she and her husband changed their minds, one parent recalled thinking,

> The concept is great, but then they said well, what would it really mean…and when we came down to it, there were some downsides to neighborhood schools. What we learned is that we’d have some primarily lower class, primarily African American/Latino schools that if you looked at how things tended to go, would not be a positive thing for the district. So you’d have problems with retention, attendance, high end faculty and then your scores drop and you don’t meet the standards…yeah there are some positives, but I don’t think it’s going to outweigh these…

For this family, despite believing that neighborhood schools is fundamentally a good idea, the connection between the creation of segregated schools and the exacerbation of numerous barriers to academic achievement for particular students proved to be one of the most significant components of this debate and resulted in a change of opinion for them. In a similar discussion about the idea of neighborhood schools being a good one, another parent replied “and the concept was nice…and still it’s nice, but the concept of a milkman is also very nice and that’s just not going to happen, you know…” It is important to note that the White suburban families in this group are not likely to be negatively impacted by the NSA given their place of residence, so what is relevant here is their regard for those that would, namely poor children and children of color. There is certainly a thread running through these comments that suggests they understand that doing the right thing for others is a positive thing for the entire district. Challenging a return to neighborhood schools because such a return would significantly alter the educational and occupational path for other people’s
children as they see it is indicative of the level of concern this group of parents has for the welfare of others in general.

Black Parents and the Illusion of Choice

Given what White suburban opponents of the NSA have shared, hearing from Black parents would be especially informative, particularly because their children would feel the greatest impact of a return to neighborhood schools. It should come as no surprise that the primary concern for Black parents who supported maintaining the current student assignment plan was the issue of equity for students of color within the Canton community. For those who thought twice about whether to support the NSA before ultimately deciding not to do so, this was the defining factor. As one suburban parent articulates the struggle for them, he said the following,

I: Did you decide to support the NSA or support the plan you already have in place?
S: Well that was kind of tough, because if I look at myself and my wife, we moved into this area with the expectation that this is what we want and that’s a selfish point of view. And the thing that made me wrestle with it was that the kids being bused out of Springdale are the kids that are going to fall short. Because what happens when all these things take place is that the schools where the majority of the minority kids go are going to fall down. The teachers are going to run out, you’ll get teachers that are barely in the district, the facilities are not going to be as good. If we push all of the minorities out of the north [the suburbs] it’s going to go back to the way it used to be…so that’s where my struggle was.

I: So it sounds like your struggle was the fact that right up front you’re saying I want to support the NSA because that’s why we moved up here, so my kids could be in this
neighborhood. The struggle comes though when you realize what this means for kids in the city.

S: Right…

I: So where did you wind up on all of this?

S: I wanted to keep it the way it is…where they get bused out for three years, which I call their tour of duty. I want it to stay that way. Originally I liked the neighborhood schools plan because our kids could stay in the same schools longer because of the grade configuration changes. But again…that’s about us, its selfishness. When I saw where it was going…right back to where it used to be, I had to say something else.

A parent residing in the city voiced a similar concern as he shared why he decided almost immediately to support maintaining the current plan, noting this,

S: I’m for neighborhood schools conditionally because I’ve always said that the busing thing although it promoted integration of the schools and equal opportunity for education, I felt that the children have paid the price. If they leveled the playing field and had schools in African American neighborhoods that had the same facilities, resources, faculties and all of the other academic things as schools not in those neighborhoods…you know that were on par, then that’s where you can achieve some of the things that busing does.

I: What I hear you saying is that since the schools in the city don’t tend to have that, you said then keep them on the bus and keep the plan the way it is?

S: That’s right…I’m saying that I don’t see how you can get around that…the residential divisions are already preset…

I: Right, because the neighborhoods are not very integrated.
S: You know, there are people who will never financially be able to afford to move into some of those areas…there are a few tokens in those areas but that’s it really.

The comments from these two participants capture the essence of this very unique struggle for Black families in Springdale. How do they negotiate the desire to have their children attend schools within their own neighborhood while ensuring that those schools are economically and academically comparable to those in the surrounding suburban communities? One parent from the city, although in support of neighborhood schools, experienced quite a bit of difficulty with her decision to support the NSA because of her concerns about equity. When asked if she saw any positives to keeping Canton’s current plan she had this to say,

S: Like the way they are learning, because I don’t think that if they have a majority Black school that they would be learning on the same level that they are now.

I: Why not?

S: I don’t know….I just don’t think they would.

I: So you think school wouldn’t be as rigorous academically if you went back to neighborhood schools?

S: Nope.

I: Now what about the schools that then become more White… what do you think would happen to them academically?

S: They would be the same or a little higher.
Despite what this parent sees as the negative consequence to returning to neighborhood schools, at that point in the interview, she was saying that other factors were more of a concern for her, factors which we will explore in later sections.

So regardless of whether or not they voted for neighborhood schools in the end, Black parents understood the implications of returning to such a system and clearly identified it as a struggle. As one parent so plainly put it, “This was more of a difficult choice for Black parents whose kids would be affected the most, but I had no choice”. And this is perhaps the most significant component within this debate – the idea that for Black parents, there is simply no choice. White parents, most of whom reside in the suburbs, can opt out of this discussion altogether if they are wealthy enough merely by enrolling their children in private schools. If they are not so fortunate, as several of them indicated in their own interviews, they still had the ability to make a choice that would not significantly handicap their children in the long run. Choosing to return to neighborhood schools would for them be a win-win situation because their children would no longer have to spend three years in the city; and the schools they would attend would not be plagued by limited resources, under qualified teachers, and less rigorous curriculum. Black families, with the exception of the very few earning enough to reside in suburban neighborhoods cannot choose to simply opt out and are therefore in a far more vulnerable position to be sure. Clearly then, whether they are fighting for the academic success of their own children or for those they left behind when they moved on, these families appear to have no choice indeed.

*Canton’s Educators: Refusing to Go Back*

Canton’s educators echoed the sentiments of parents who opposed the NSA. Throughout their interviews, educators strongly expressed their dissatisfaction with the law
and voiced concerns that it would result in what they viewed as the resegregation of the
district’s students. Specifically, educators pointed to how quickly the schools in Canton
would become racially and economically identifiable under the new law given the fairly high
level of residential segregation that continues to be evident within this community.
Participants in this group generally noted three primary areas of concern in their discussions
about the negative impact the law would have on lower income, minority students.
Mentioned most often was the idea that schools that would become predominately Black
would have far fewer resources than other schools throughout the district. One participant
noted that neither the city of Springdale nor the state have the resources to support “those
types of schools”. Implicit in his words is the recognition that schools with high levels of
minority students and concentrated poverty necessarily require additional resources and
support in order to effectively meet the needs of the students who attend these schools.

Closely connected to this was the concern that high poverty/high minority schools
would be filled with less experienced teachers, another type of resource to be sure. Again
noting the consequences of concentrated poverty within particular communities, participants
suggested that teachers with seniority, and by default more experience, would not choose to
teach in schools located in these areas. As they see it, this has a very definite impact on the
academic success of the students attending such schools. Identifying this area as an issue
specifically, one participant noted,

Teachers that are first rate go along with the school which is a big problem because
you know and I know that there are very few tenured, experienced teachers that
would want to work in the city. You can be as liberal as you want but so long as we
have the issues in the city that exist, you are not going to get those experienced
teachers to go there...it’s unfortunate.

Of particular interest to me as a researcher of color was that during these discussions,
participants of color specifically noted that there were also not enough minority teachers in
the district to teach at these schools – clearly something they viewed as necessary. Although
the White educators were equally concerned about teacher quality within these schools if the
community returned to neighborhood schools, none of them discussed needing minority
teachers specifically in these settings. One could infer that minority educators see the lack of
minority teachers working in high minority schools as an additional problem that White
educators may not be as “tuned into”. Prior to desegregation, Black schools were run almost
entirely by Black educators and there have certainly been critics of desegregation, some
from within the Black community, who argue that something was lost when schools became
integrated (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Rossell, Armor, & Walberg, 2002). The sense of
community pride, the ability to model particular values for Black children by adults within
the same community, and the absence of discriminatory treatment within schools, are all
things that some say we gave up by fighting to desegregate our schools. Perhaps the
minority educators interviewed here would make a similar argument if Canton were indeed
to return to neighborhood schools. One might even wonder if they are suggesting that in this
instance, minority teachers are synonymous with high quality teachers for minority schools?
Or perhaps they are merely being honest, noting that very few White teachers would likely
volunteer to teach in the city schools if they had a choice to teach elsewhere, therefore
making the point that it would be imperative to have enough teachers of color to staff these
schools.
Finally, within the concept of equity, many of the educators interviewed perceived a return to neighborhood schools as moving backwards. They continued to discuss the fact that they couldn’t understand why anyone would believe that moving to neighborhood schools would truly benefit students within the district. As he discussed the idea of returning to neighborhood schools as a way to shorten the bus rides for students throughout the county, one educator comments,

I understand their feeling, but I will not ever believe that that hour is worth resegregation. We’ve come too far, we’re not going back…it has taken us a lot of sweat and tears to get where we are, we’re not going back.

During one interview in particular, the administrator was far more candid and became quite upset as she described her perception of the NSA as a step backwards. Responding to a question about why she supported maintaining Canton’s current student assignment plan she replied,

The biggest thing for me was that they were figuring out all these ways to get around this and that it was racist. It was reverting back…you know, we just spent 20 years getting past this and it was going to put situations back where kids couldn’t be with each other and then they could build their prejudice based on somebody else’s impression instead of their interactions. We would be set back and it just ticks me off…I mean don’t get me started, but it just ticks me off. And for people to say it has to do with money, I said no it doesn’t, it has to do with race, they don’t want kids together.

One can sense the level of passion these educators have about not wanting to undo the work of the last 50 years as they see it. One participant candidly noted that “we didn’t have
separate but equal then and we wouldn’t have it this time around either”. For them, there is no question about the inequity that would result from a return to neighborhood schools in this community.

When asked what they heard other educators saying about the NSA, all of the participants interviewed said that they heard similar comments from colleagues who were concerned that the law would create high poverty/high minority schools, leading to the resegregation of Canton’s public school students. Most notable in this discussion was the idea that neither they nor their colleagues believed that there was a good reason to create such a situation. For these participants, creating more high poverty schools seemed to be antithetical to their role as educators given the realities of trying to ensure the academic success of children living in areas with high concentrations of poverty. If their job is to help children succeed academically, why would they knowingly create the very circumstances proven to lessen their chances of doing so? It would seem that this question was not hard to answer for this group of participants as one after another, they cited issues of equity and fairness as their primary reason for not supporting the NSA.

Community Leaders and Perceptions of Equity

During interviews with Canton’s community leaders those who opposed the NSA raised issues of equity immediately. While the politician who sponsored the law did not immediately raise this issue, he had a great deal to say about the topic nevertheless. In any case, the idea of equity was a powerful one for each of the four community leaders interviewed.

Community leaders were a unique group of participants because of their position within this process. For instance, opponents of the NSA discussed their reactions to the law
even before it was passed because they clearly had more knowledge of it than the rest of the Canton community. Early on for instance Mrs. Evans, the school board president, noted “we thought the law was not going to have a positive impact on the kids”. As a result the board developed a position statement denouncing the NSA prior to its actual passage, a move she says they don’t normally do when it comes to legislation. Additionally, she shared the fact that as they were developing the charges for the neighborhood schools committee that was formed to develop possible neighborhood school plans, the board set several parameters. Regardless of which plans they proposed in the end the committee was told that they needed to specifically address issues of equity and diversity. Ms. Moore, the chair of the SNSC raised similar concerns about issues of equity prior to the passage of the NSA and noted this, “I heard about the NSA through my advocacy work. So before it actually passed, a number of community leaders held a series of crisis oriented meetings to organize a protest against the passage of this legislation”. Clearly these comments demonstrate the urgency with which several of Canton’s leaders responded to a policy they viewed as detrimental to children within their community. Even before the NSA went to the state legislature, community leaders set about trying to make sure that it would not become law. Despite their efforts however, we know that the NSA was passed in April of 2000, setting the stage for this truly dynamic process to occur.

Addressing issues of equity and articulating one side of the neighborhood schools debate Ms. Moore had this to say,

It’s about inequity…because if neighborhood schools didn’t mean inequity, there would be a very different reaction to it on the part of people who spoke out against the NSA. But we know that when kids get into segregated environments
then there are inequities. There are inequities even in a desegregated environment, so they get further exacerbated in segregated environments. So just on the basis of history, we could not be in support of it.

Another participant had this to say as we discussed the specifics of actually implementing the law,

Well, you know, and I would say this without any qualms...we have legislators here in the state that are quite conservative. I think they would be very comfortable under the premise of Plessy vs. Ferguson, but they’re under the impression that a minority family would be extremely comfortable with having a school across the street knowing that the school is a sub par school that doesn’t have the resources. My argument is that that is completely false. Minority parents will go to any lengths to get their kids into a quality school, if it means travel or if it doesn’t mean travel. So the thinking may have been somewhat simplistic but in reality it’s not the way most minority people think...He was wrong.

_The word on the street_

We continue to see this theme of equity as community leaders presented what they heard from parents as well. Mrs. Evans, for instance, discussed what she heard from parents during this process and whether she could identify any differences in their concerns depending on whom she was hearing from. As she shares what she heard from various groups of residents, her response directly speaks to issues of equity, but includes additional aspects of the discussion as well,

The most dominate theme I heard from city and suburban parents alike was we just can’t create some schools in which we have an extremely difficult time recruiting and
retaining high quality teachers and principals. That resonated so deeply with parents, it’s not about the length of the bus ride…it’s about the quality of teachers once you get there and that got through to people. I heard a lot from city parents saying we are sick and tired of our kids being on the bus for nine years. We have the majority of the burden and we are tired of not feeling welcome when we go to the suburbs and go to the school and feel uncomfortable…we want our kids in our community and where they are safe and we know they won’t be discriminated against or treated differently. We feel that there are different expectations for Black kids vs. White kids and we are tired of that….of our kids’ talent not being seen. So there were some who said absolutely I would prefer a school in my own neighborhood with kids who look like my kids and teachers who look like my family who I know will believe in my kids, but then they get hung on the “but”…I know the reality is we won’t get the level of resources needed in order to have comparable teachers, so then if we have to, we will get on the damn bus.

In this statement alone, there are several critical issues that must be addressed in any debate on returning to neighborhood schools. For the moment, we will focus on what Evans raised both at the beginning and again at the end of her comments. According to her, residents in both the city and the suburbs were deeply concerned that the NSA would lead to the creation of high poverty schools which by their very nature require a significant amount of resources to ensure that children in those schools experience the same levels of academic success as their wealthier and most often White suburban counterparts. Of all the areas to be concerned with namely, high quality teachers, rigorous curriculum, sufficient and updated academic materials, high levels of expectation regarding student ability, and well maintained
facilities, it is interesting to note that residents appeared to be most disturbed about the possibility of not having highly qualified, experienced teachers in schools that would then be identified as high poverty/high minority schools. One might suggest that residents in this community believe that having highly qualified teachers in such schools mitigates some or all of the other concerns.

But what is most compelling about what this participant shared is the thought process of Black parents, most of who reside in the city as they work through the fact that to be Black in Canton is a very different experience than being a White resident. Once again the most powerful and fundamental component here is the lack of choices these residents feel they have when it comes to the issue of neighborhood schools. We’ve heard it from Black parents themselves and we hear it again as Mrs. Evans shares what she heard during this process - despite wanting their children to attend schools in their own neighborhood they have no other choice but to support maintaining Canton’s current plan if they have any hope of ensuring that their children receive equal educational opportunities in their system of public education.

_The man behind the law_

During my interview with the legislator who authored the NSA, however, he countered the issues his opponents raised with his own perceptions on resegregation and equity. As we discussed the fact that there were suburban White parents who shifted their opinions on the idea of neighborhood schools during this process for instance Mr. Jones noted this,

I: But some folks shifted when they saw the research on high poverty schools and they said well we don’t want resegregation…
S: And that’s where the politics come in. Some of the research is absolutely refuted by people who are there [in districts that have returned to neighborhood schools] today. I’d invite you to call them up. Segregation is a legal term meaning the intentional separation of races by policy or by law. What we’re talking about is racial identifiability. You know, no one is proud of this country’s history of segregation, but when you say to people “resegregate” you know it brings out a kind of latent guilt. So the district was very good at using that. I said if you’re going to fight this, I will concede that schools will be racially identifiable, sure…but don’t call it resegregation because it’s not, that’s a legal term. They make it sound like a policy that’s saying Black kids couldn’t go to school with White kids…and the people all say well geez,

I don’t want that. It’s a smart thing politically for them to do…to call it that and choose that label.

He went on to add that the charter school that Ms. Moore runs in the city is predominately Black, and points out that no one is protesting the fact that clearly her school is racially identifiable as well. While the jury is certainly still out on the charter school movement as a whole, one could argue that such schools are a far cry from schools that become racially identifiable as a result of involuntary educational policy changes without a specific agenda or sufficient autonomy to find more effective ways to meet the needs of the children they serve. Nevertheless, he clearly does not support the notion that returning to neighborhood schools would be detrimental to certain populations because of the inherent inequity that opponents claim would surely follow. Interestingly enough, although Mr. Jones
does discuss distribution of students as he makes his concession, he does not actually address resource distribution during the interview.

Mr. Jones also shared his feelings about what Black parents in particular were thinking throughout this process. One part of our conversation went this way,

I: Did you see any difference between what Black parents were saying vs. what White parents were saying for instance…or between city parents and suburban ones?

S: Sure, I think that city parents and Black parents were less supportive of neighborhood schools and it was an interesting break because a lot of the Black parents from the city are very concerned that minority kids from the city are the ones bearing the brunt of this social experiment, which is the amount of time they spend on buses. And when you talk about segregation, you had community advocates out there saying that the old system is racist. I’m sure it gave a lot of minority parents comfort who feel like this isn’t going to be fair to them.

I: Sure…

S: So that was kind of a ready made group who was ready to be suspicious of me and the idea to go to neighborhood schools was just some kind of roll back the clock thing…and you had advocates telling them that’s what it was.

I: Right…the Ozzie and Harriet scenario. But you did have some Black parents saying yes let’s go back to neighborhood schools.

S: Yeah, like some of the charter schools. There are obviously some parents who are voting with their feet saying we like this idea and we don’t care if it’s all Black or mostly minority or reflects the racial makeup of the local neighborhood, you know…
we’re close, we’re at home, we can get there, we can be a part of the school and it’s a good thing. So I think that’s a pretty significant vote because people voted with their feet to do that.

Jones’ primary thinking about why Black parents opposed the NSA in the end is because they were being led by advocates to do so. While this may in fact be the case for many of these residents, it does not quite capture the entire story. Remember that several of the Black parents interviewed did not need to wait to hear from various advocates before making the decision to support maintaining Canton’s current plan despite the fact that in an ideal world, they would actually prefer neighborhood schools. The decision not to support the NSA was based on their own knowledge and beliefs about returning to neighborhood schools - a system of public education they firmly believed to be inherently unequal and detrimental to children of color.

In the end, as three of the four community leaders interviewed shared why they opposed the NSA, it becomes clear that the primary issues were ones of equity and resegregation. Based on the responses from this group of participants, along with those from parents and educators they opposed the NSA specifically because they viewed neighborhood schools as harmful to children of color. Although these participants believe that neighborhood schools is in theory a good idea, they clearly understand the realities of returning to such a pattern of student assignment given the current demographics of the city of Springdale and its surrounding communities. It would seem that these participants view having access to quality education as a fundamental right of all children and are fully prepared to do what is necessary to ensure that all children receive it. Simply put, one might argue that morality was a primary motivation for parents, educators, and
community leaders opposed to the NSA to become mobilized to prevent racial and economic resegregation within their public schools.

_Shades of Plessy: Neighborhood School Supporters_

Before closing this discussion however, we must explore what neighborhood schools supporters had to say about issues of equity as well. During the interviews, all participants were asked what factors were most important for them as they considered whether or not to support the NSA. While issues of equity were not significant enough concerns for parents in this group to oppose the NSA, they did have very definite opinions about such issues. In fact, the most intriguing discussions with this group were by far those that centered on issues of equity and fairness, as respondents talked about whether they believed that returning to neighborhood schools would result in the resegregation of Canton’s public schools. Whether it was discussed as resegregation or as the creation of racially and economically identifiable schools, as Jones offered, most of the participants agreed that returning to neighborhood schools would produce such a circumstance because Canton’s neighborhoods are not completely integrated. One parent said the following,

I think that our communities need to be more integrated. In our neighborhood it’s somewhat racially balanced. If by sending kids to geographically closest schools it’s going to divide them, then maybe that is a different question for society…well what’s going on…why don’t people move here. Why don’t people want to move here…is there something else that needs to be done?

While participants did seem to understand that returning to neighborhood schools would result in the creation of racially/economically identifiable schools within Canton, it is what they said after acknowledging this that is most significant. Here’s how one parent
answered when asked whether this issue came up for him, “It did not really occur to me personally because all I wanted was my kids here. It doesn’t really matter…if they want to choice here that is fine”. Later in the discussion, the issue comes up again as we discuss the feelings of some of Canton’s Black residents. The conversation went this way,

S: Have you been interviewing Black families?
I: Yes, but I have several more I need to interview.
S: Are they interested in neighborhood schooling?
I: I have had mixed answers actually. Some of the Black parents have said yes we want neighborhood schools but we are concerned about the quality we get…we understand that if we get neighborhood schools, they will not be equal because of cost issues and poverty.
S: Oh absolutely…we want fairness. I mean in the city I’m sure the schools are run down and trashy and out here, ours are nice. It’s not fair for the district to throw them back in that direction…we don’t want that like I said. We personally want neighborhood schools for our kids and if they want to switch theirs out that is fine…we could care less.
I: I think then for some Black parents, their decision is based on the inequality they expect so instead they are saying then forget it, let’s just keep it the way it is…
S: And I wouldn’t blame them for that opinion. So if they’re going to have neighborhood schools then they need to even out the quality of the schools everywhere…that has to be done.

At that point in the interview I found myself wondering if this parent had any idea of the impact of his comments. The perception one is left with is that Black families can do
whatever they need to in order to ensure that their children receive a quality education, but only if it does not affect his own family in the process. Addressing the same question, another participant said this,

S: Clearly some of the schools would not be as diverse.

I: And part of what people raised was the quality of those schools in areas with high concentrations of poverty and/or minority students….that the quality of those schools would not be the same as the schools in the burbs.

S: My feeling is that if that is an issue, then give them smaller class sizes…that would help with that.

I: Ok, so actually what you would argue then is to go ahead with neighborhood schools but provide additional resources?

S: Right, then you need to accommodate the needs of those children…it doesn’t matter where they are. We just need to accommodate everybody and I think that our district didn’t see that this was possible. They just didn’t want to spend their finances on that.

Finally, one neighborhood school supporter raised the following as she pointed to the legislator’s contention that busing in and of itself is racist, a view she fully supports. As we discussed her reasons for choosing to support neighborhood schools, the conversation went this way,

I: So are there other reasons that came up for you?

S: In a nutshell that’s basically it. I don’t see any educational benefit to the busing. Ted Jones even said it’s actually racist. To say if you sit a Black child next to a White child somehow like the White child will be smarter and it will reach over…
it’s actually racist and I am not a racist person. I just don’t get why they think that it is better for the inner city kids.

I: Well, I don’t think people are saying you have to sit next to a White child for your child to do better…it’s not so much sitting next to White students as much as it’s about attending the schools that most white students attend because they tend to be more middle class and you’d have more access to resources and more experienced teachers…it’s actually more about class than race. Schools, which are predominately lower income and minority, tend to have less…

S: Well that should not be…that isn’t right. Then the school district should do something about that, they should address that.

Based on the comments of these participants, we know that neighborhood school supporters, like their opponents, understand that a return to neighborhood schools would result in higher levels of inequity between schools given the current level of residential segregation within Canton. Where the two groups differ on this issue however, is what is most compelling here. Opponents of the NSA seem to believe that it is their responsibility to ensure equal educational opportunities for every student in Canton and viewed their vote to maintain the current plan as the way to do that. Neighborhood school supporters on the other hand seem to believe that it is the district’s responsibility to resolve the situation and therefore did not see their support of neighborhood schools as part of the equation. It becomes clear that perhaps the most fundamental difference between proponents and opponents of the NSA then is where they place the responsibility for ensuring that all of Canton’s students receive a quality education. One might suggest that once you clear away the noise, it is the difference between being concerned only about one’s own children versus
being concerned about other people’s children as well. It would seem that neighborhood school supporters actually support the Plessy doctrine of separate but equal without considering the fact that it clearly never worked. Interestingly enough, one neighborhood school supporter in particular summed it up this way,

I mean to say that you don’t understand…that would almost feel like saying you don’t even care about educating that whole population and whenever I brought that up to other people, they’ve just been not very responsive. A supporter of neighborhood schools doesn’t seem to understand that. In a sense they think it is just the teacher’s job, but it is not...we have to figure out a way to make everybody have equal education and equal opportunity.

It should come as no surprise that throughout her interview this parent actually had the most difficulty wrestling with the realities of the situation at hand – desiring a return to neighborhood schools, but wanting every child to experience true academic success.

Opportunities for Diversity

Just as issues of equity were a primary concern for participants in this study, the concept of diversity was an important component as parents, educators and community leaders shared their reasons for supporting or opposing the NSA. Most of the conversations that took place were about the opportunity to experience diverse groups of people that Canton’s current system of public education affords its students. Despite believing that the exposure of young people to individuals with racial, socioeconomic, and religious differences is a fundamental goal of public education, some participant groups raised additional concerns around diversity that speak to the complexity of the issues at hand. Nonetheless, what
participants offered on the subject as they discussed the events that took place within Canton helps readers further understand this process.

Choosing Diversity: The Suburban Struggle

Among White suburban parents who opposed the NSA, issues of opportunity around diversity surfaced, but in two very pronounced ways. On the one hand, several parents discussed the desire for their children to have the opportunity to attend schools with a racially and economically diverse group of children. On the other hand, these participants discussed how the NSA actually created the opportunity for discussions of race and class throughout the community. For them, both of these aspects were important components within this process.

For some parents, the desire to have their children in a diverse environment is directly tied to the decision to send their children to public school, particularly when large percentages of children in their neighborhoods attend private schools. These parents talked openly about making this decision while “helpful” neighbors warned them that they needed to get their children into the private school system as early as possible in order to ensure admittance. To them, however, private schooling meant limited access to cultural, racial, and economic diversity. The opportunity to be surrounded by such diversity was viewed as both positive and necessary for their children’s development. Addressing this feeling one parent shared,

…look, one reason I have my kids going to this school when the rest of the neighborhood is using the private school system and when there’s a gifted program that was opted out of is because I want my kids in a diverse school
environment and this is going to reverse all of that. The one thing I really like and want my kids to be part of would go away under the new plan.

In her mind, the opportunity to expose her children to those who are different from themselves was a key factor in her decision to support efforts to maintain the current levels of racial and economic diversity within the Canton School District. Other parents expressed similar feelings and as one noted, “Well, because I think it’s important for all schools to have all kinds of children from all areas and all backgrounds...economic, social...every background because kids pull so much from each other”. Recalling Allport’s (1954) work, it is reasonable to assume that study participants have at some point either experienced the conditions identified to promote positive intergroup interactions, or at the very least, recognized that they want something different for their own children if they have not. Their commitment to providing diverse experiences for their children suggests that this group of parents believes in and values the rewards that positive intergroup relationships offer.

Another parent addresses her desire to maintain the current student assignment plan in order to provide these experiences for her children but raises something that is especially critical to any dialogue about differences. She says,

…and this whole idea that the benefit that my kids get from being in a classroom that’s really diverse...and there’s pros and cons to it, but I feel that there are certain educational needs that as a parent you want to make sure they get...at least they’re in a school system that is relatively representative of the world they’re growing into…and that’s a big reason we maintain involvement in the public school system.

What is of particular interest here is that while this parent sees the need to have children in a diverse learning environment, she suggests that there are positives and negatives to doing so,
which brings us to the second way that the concept of opportunity was discussed among participants. Several parents in this particular group of participants raised the issue of the development and perpetuation of negative stereotypes that being in a diverse school has resulted in for their children. Each of these parents addressed the same issue - the comments made by their children at very early ages about the Black children being the ones that are always in trouble and other such observations. During the interviews, each of these parents related the level of shock they felt about these comments, but pointed to the fact that ultimately, such comments resulted in opportunities to address these kinds of negative stereotypes with their children very early on. As one parent noted,

She and I were talking this morning about the kids in her class and behavior issues and that’s been ongoing…but what it leads to is so many discussions about families and different kinds of families and just the struggles that kids have and how they deal with those.

Addressing the same issue, a second parent responded,

Yeah it was both kids, 1st grade… “why are all the Black people either rowdy, not behaving, too loud, don’t listen to the rules…” and I’m like aghast. You sent them to public school to learn the value of diversity and all its taught them is all this, what’s going wrong? Well, it has provided a huge number of opportunities to talk about variety…class, color, faith, the whole deal.

As these parents share, they certainly did not anticipate this kind of response from their children toward students of color for example, but the opportunity to unpack these negative impressions and address them head on has proved to be worth it in the long run. Although the Canton community fought to maintain racial and economic diversity within
their schools, based on these discussions, we can assume that the conditions required to minimize or even eliminate these kinds of negative responses among its students are not present within their classrooms. Research has demonstrated that merely putting Black and White students together in schools does not automatically result in positive intergroup interactions (Allport, 1954; Brewer & Gaertner, 2001; Brown, 1995; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Schoefield, 1989). It would seem that what these parents are describing further supports this argument. Despite the importance of diversity to the Canton community and their efforts to develop positive interactions among various groups of students, the stories presented here suggest that there is still more work to be done. Clearly, finding ways to create the conditions necessary for the development of more positive intergroup relations and the elimination of such negative stereotypes should be the next step for this community.

Finally, White suburban parents who opposed the NSA felt that the actual process of responding to it ultimately presented community members with the opportunity to confront and discuss issues of race and class more openly. It seems that for some parents, the feeling is that these kinds of dialogues are critical to the development of this community and don’t often occur among its residents. Participants shared that as a result of this process, they began talking more honestly about these issues to their neighbors, fellow church members, and the like. Moreover, they reported that they were sometimes surprised to learn what others actually thought about these issues as the community moved through this process, as they often assumed that people felt the same way they did. For these parents, despite their fundamental disagreement with the NSA, the passage of it truly afforded the opportunity to “put their money where their mouth is” as they saw it, and provided a way to reexamine their own beliefs about race and class.
The Diversity Debate for Black Parents

As Black parents, both supporters and opponents of the NSA, shared their views on diversity we hear similar messages around the extent to which they value the current levels of diversity within the community. All of the parents in this group shared the belief that educating children within diverse school environments is an important part of public education for all children, not just for students of color. But not all participants had issues of diversity near the top of their list of reasons to keep the current plan. One suburban family commented on what they viewed as the positive effects of having a system of public education which encompasses a great degree of racial diversity for instance, noting,

Well the diversity was important too, it made a big difference because the suburban kids’ idea of Blacks was completely different from what they were learning. So a lot of them started to see no color. At Diggstown you see interracial friendships and couples…everybody is with everybody. And I think a lot of the White parents welcomed it…I can tell because the White kids drive to school and think nothing of picking up the Black kids, or riding home together after the games.

While other Black and White participants tended to agree with this family that maintaining diversity was an important element in the neighborhood schools debate, there were differences in how diversity was perceived between the two groups. Once again, during their interviews, Black participants raised additional issues that capture the reality of being a student of color in integrated schools. For Black parents, there was always an underlying concern about their children that is simply non-existent for Whites. One parent addressed it this way as she made the following statement,
My personal opinion was that it should stay the way it is. I mean this is our world today, even though you still have a lot of prejudices and separation. But for the most part, you can live in places that you never could so we are kind of mixed and the kids have all kinds of friends and it’s fine. But you know, you can never forget who you are...you should never forget that.

One of the suburban parents, clearly voicing a similar concern noted this,

I think diversity is a buzzword. A lot of times the word diversity is about smoke and mirrors. Now I do think it’s important for our kids to interact, and we were thinking that [if we return to neighborhood schools] our kids will be one of only 2 or 3% in their school...do they then lose their identity?

Lastly, a parent from the city expressed his feelings on the issue of diversity as well, and questioned just how well the diversity within the schools is actually being utilized. When asked how much diversity factored into his decision to support keeping Canton’s current plan, he had this to say,

Well you know I believe in diversity but I think sometimes it’s overblown because there’s always that issue that even in situations where you are promoting diversity, sometimes they’re still pretty segregated once they’re in the school. I just get the feeling when I’m listening to my grandson when he comes home that like the kids on the teams are naturally integrated but like at the games you will see 1 or 2 Black kids sitting with the White kids...the groups are still often not sitting together.

While white participants raised some concerns generated from the high levels of diversity currently present within Canton’s schools, namely the negative stereotypes of
Blacks that they have had to address with their own children, Black parents clearly have some concerns as well. Parents in this group address two very different issues for Black students that schools and communities need to be cognizant of. As they examined the pros and cons of returning to neighborhood schools, both Black and White parents were concerned that the current levels of racial, economic, and religious diversity within schools for instance would be lost. Blacks however raise the often overlooked issue of within school segregation as they address the dynamics that occur in integrated schools. One parent addressed this issue quite directly in the following comment,

My boys have been in honors classes and there are not a whole lot of minorities which I don’t get. That puzzles me because I know a lot of very smart minority students and that always amazed me. I have always wondered about that and I ask those questions because all through school, they have been like the only 1 or 2 in their classes.

Whether one is discussing the tendency for students in integrated schools to socialize primarily within their own racial groups or the more troubling pattern of low minority attendance in advanced placement courses, these concerns were raised by Black parents alone. Why does it appear that Black parents in Canton are more likely than their White counterparts to raise the issues that are below the surface and frankly far more insidious? Is it the case that for White parents, simply having Black and White students attending the same school is enough? The more likely answer may be that because neither of these patterns is seen to have a negative effect on White children, they simply don’t resonate for White parents in the way that they do for Blacks.
The second issue raised by these participants, which was viewed only as a concern if neighborhood schools had actually been implemented was also not a matter of concern for White participants. Suburban Black parents truly worried about the impact of returning to neighborhood schools on their children’s self identity given the demographic changes that would occur. Although these families report that they moved into suburban neighborhoods in an effort to achieve a higher standard of living, they did so under the current student assignment pattern. Their children would never be the only Black children in suburban schools as long as Canton’s current plan was in place. Once this system is disrupted however, the concern becomes how well their children will fare not academically but socially and developmentally instead. Without a doubt, there are issues to contend with when your child is one of only two or three Black children in a school, whether they are issues of valuing one’s own community and identity or issues of how they will be treated within those settings. Either way, they are issues that simply would not be relevant to White families under a neighborhood schools plan and ones that they would therefore not raise. Ultimately then what we hear if we listen closely enough is that while both Blacks and Whites in this study report that they value the diversity within the Canton School District, they necessarily think about issues of diversity a bit differently. Surely, as these participants reveal, the issues that are salient only to families of color, one can see why that would be the case. Moreover understanding the differences helps us further appreciate the complexity of this story.

*Sacrificing Diversity for Neighborhood Schools*

White suburban neighborhood schools supporters also believed that diversity was an important aspect of public education, but they did not view it as significant enough to support maintaining the current system of student busing. When it was discussed, all of the
participants in this group reported that having children in diverse settings was a valuable component of public education. For some, the discussion centered on the fact that they perceived their particular neighborhoods to be diverse, and therefore believe that even with neighborhood schools, much of that diversity might be preserved. For instance, one parent responded,

I think a lot of the districts throughout the state are still pretty segregated and we used to be like that. I think we’ve come a long way and our neighborhoods have become more diversified and I think that’s important, but I just keep going back to the fact that community schools is more important…that’s just how I feel.

This participant, while obviously feeling that diversity is important, believes that what neighborhood schools can offer communities is more valuable in the long run. Others, who also believe that educating children in diverse environments is important, simply disagree with how to make that happen. Here’s how one such conversation went,

I: How do you feel about issues of diversity because that is what some residents have raised?

S: You should not have to do it with busing, you know. Yes I think the schools do a pretty good job of teaching tolerance like in December, we don’t call it the Christmas party. We call it the December party so we have Hanukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, whatever. The schools are teaching tolerance and I think it’s a tough one. I don’t think we should put all of societies problems on kids though. So basically what we’re saying is that the grown ups can’t get it right…we can’t integrate our communities so let’s make the kids go on these really long bus rides and you’re still putting the burden on the city kids…I mean those poor kids for all those years have to be bused.
I: So you’re arguing that you believe diversity is important, but we just need to do it on a larger scale?

S: Yes…I’m an Air Force wife and we moved from place to place. Those bases are much more diverse. Here it’s less integrated but it’s odd to think that somehow the schools are going to fix this…it’s more of a societal issue. Whatever they are doing in the military to try and attract different people, maybe the employers here ought to be doing that.

This mother raises a good point, a point that has always been at the center of certain educational policy debates – the idea that we are attempting to resolve more systemic social issues through our system of public education.

The parent who raised the issue of neighborhood school supporters not understanding that providing equal educational opportunities was the community’s responsibility discussed her experience as she discussed the issue of diversity with others. She had this to say,

I don’t think people talked about it that much. To be honest it looks like they are not comfortable talking about it. Like I am fine talking about it but when I bring this stuff up, I don’t think people really want to respond. Especially considering that all of the neighborhood school supporters that we know are people that did not grow up here pretty much, they have moved here…this whole area is like where people get transferred to, so they are coming here and they have no idea what it even means. This whole busing situation is totally foreign to them.

Finally, there was one parent referred as a neighborhood school supporter, who actually turned out to have no preference either way regarding student assignment patterns in Canton. She went on to note during this portion of our discussion that part of what she liked about the
current plan was the fact that the students were in diverse school settings. That parent responded in this way,

Well if we went back to neighborhood schools they definitely would be segregated...I mean middle class White people mostly live in this area and if we went back to neighborhood schools my children would have gone to school with a sea of White children. I think it’s a good experience for my kids to go to school with people from different religions, races, different financial backgrounds, because that is the way the world is…not just a bunch of middle income White people.

Other than this last parent, it seems that neighborhood school supporters are willing to sacrifice the diversity they ultimately desire in order to have their children closer to home. This is certainly not an uncommon attitude among parents in general as desegregation debates continue to occur across the United States (Orfield, 2001; Powell 2002). As we know, such thinking presents a clear dilemma for this country as we continue to search for ways to provide a quality education for all of our children.

*Diversity and Inclusion in Public Education*

Canton’s educators weighed in on this discussion of course and shared similar feelings about the need to maintain the current levels of racial and economic diversity in the district’s schools. The most common response given by educators was the notion that high levels of racial and economic diversity were welcomed and valued within the Canton School District. In fact, several educators noted that Canton was more diverse than some of the other districts within the county. Essentially, participants saw a need for students to experience diverse settings in order to be prepared for the 21st century and viewed their current student assignment pattern as the way to ensure that students have such an
opportunity. When asked whether diversity played a role in her decision to support efforts to maintain the current student assignment plan, one educator said “I think we need diversity….that is how the world is. We do not all live in a box”. Echoing this feeling, a building administrator addresses the importance of diversity in the following way,

The world is getting small and it’s important for the Black kids and the White kids [and all the others] to see each other at an early age because before they grow up they are going to be interacting with them…

The idea that today’s young people need to experience diverse school settings in order to become well rounded productive adults was raised in almost all of the interviews as educators voiced their opinions about the process that took place in Canton. Participants were very clear about the need to provide environments where student learning is maximized, which includes gaining knowledge about other cultures, socioeconomic classes, and religions among other things. Another educator shared her feelings about the importance of providing diverse environments for both children and the community in general saying,

That [diversity] is what I think is best for the community and for the children that we’re raising as a community. You deal with all sorts of people and you’re going to grow up with them so you better develop the skills right now to deal with people who don’t speak the same as you, who don’t look the same as you, who don’t behave the same as you…that’s your world.

Other educators pointed out that learning doesn’t take place solely between teachers and students. As they see it, there is much to be learned from other students, and creating the opportunity to do so then becomes a central function of public schools. Addressing the idea that city and suburban students can learn from one another for instance, one participant
remarked, “I think both sets of kids bring a huge amount to each other. I do believe that all of our children bring something to the table…every one of them”. One principal in particular discussed the fact that in a school with high levels of diversity among the students, a certain building culture develops which would be lost if schools became racially and/or economically identifiable. Specifically she notes,

Diversity is an important piece to keep. Your building character changes if you’ve got that part over there and this part over here…that’s the way I grew up, where it was totally segregated. But you lose that diversity, that character…that bonding that happens between people, that real world culture that you have in a school when you’ve got all those people in there. Even in the poorest neighborhoods here, the schools are still mixed.

As the researcher clarifies the participant’s perception about the cultural shifts that would take place within her building upon a return to neighborhood schools, the participant goes on to add, “And culture shifts that in my mind would not have been for the best because what you’re about here is getting the children ready for out there…and out there, it’s diverse”.

Addressing the notion that school environments need to be integrated, another educator voiced his perceptions of what the Canton community in general believed saying, “the community decided that it’s best…people need to live together, to work together…to learn from one another”.

Of particular interest in this story is the fact that in one community within the Canton School District, the picture looks a little bit different. In the Deerwood community, a move to neighborhood schools would not drastically alter the levels of diversity of the schools within it. By all accounts, this primarily working class neighborhood appears to be the most
racially and economically diverse area within Canton. For instance, while returning to neighborhood schools would clearly increase the poverty levels within each school, one would not see the almost complete transformation that would be evident within schools in Canton Ridge or within the city of Springdale. A teacher from one of the schools in Deerwood responds to the my question of what changes one might expect to see for schools in that community saying, “Maybe not Deerwood so much as it would have been in some of the other schools. Deerwood is a very mixed community, so we wouldn’t have seen much of a change”. Despite such a reality, participants from schools within the Deerwood neighborhood still strongly opposed the NSA, viewing even slight changes in the level of diversity currently present within their schools as unwarranted and unacceptable.

It is important to note that throughout this process, participants reported hearing this same desire to maintain the level of diversity within the district from their students as well. High school students in particular were vocal about their wish to keep their current student assignment plan and educators were eager to share what students said. One vice principal for example had this to say about student voice,

I remember some of the articles that came out about the students. When you asked them, they were curious…like “why are we doing this - we like the diversity”. and it was refreshing to see…generally kids are good and honest and if you give them a chance, they will come through. And in my opinion when they were asked their opinion, they came through and said “no, we don’t want to go to all White schools or all Black schools”. It is a very different generation and I can’t imagine this school district without the diversity that it has.
One administrator recalled how the students responded to the NSA, and noted how active students within the district became in an effort to maintain the current student assignment plan. As she discussed the students that showed up at public hearings and the State Board of Education hearing, she specifically remembers thinking that the Board was hearing from those that would be impacted the most. She recalls that the Board must have been thinking,

These are the people who’ve been through it, who know and so you have to say this [the current plan] isn’t so bad…if this is so bad, then how come these kids want it so much? It was a wonderful thing…the kids don’t really have the alienation that we think they have or that we have had. The kids themselves have much healthier relationships.

A brief examination of newspaper articles published throughout that period supports such observations. Students interviewed by the local paper asserted that they did not see the benefit of moving back to neighborhood schools, and instead discussed the benefit of the current student assignment plan and of maintaining the racial and economic diversity they have grown up with.

A second way that the idea of diversity was presented during interviews with Canton educators was the fact that the NSA and the ensuing controversy surrounding its implementation brought a variety of different voices to the table. Traditionally, one might expect to hear a great deal of feedback about educational policies most often from those in the know – typically parents with higher levels of education and income. Moreover, depending on the actual community, minority parents are often the least vocal group in such instances. Educators in Canton, however, noticed that they were hearing parents from all racial and economic backgrounds weighing in on the issue of returning to neighborhood
schools. As she discusses the five public hearings held throughout the district during this process, one building principal notes,

People were out, if they weren’t up speaking, they were obviously supporting people who were. I think they were meetings that brought out much vocalization. There are a lot of times you don’t get that, but this issue seemed to bring out a very diverse group of people and brought out some families that are ones who usually sit back and say “yeah, that’s fine”.

Although educators were clear to point out that there were of course families that they didn’t hear from – families that still tended to be lower income minority families, the issue of neighborhood schools created an environment in which many of these families became more vocal in a way that wasn’t typical. As these participants perceived it, opposition to the NSA was strong and came from a wide group of residents. In fact, several educators said that they couldn’t actually “put a face” on those who were vocal about this issue. Despite being in a community where residents are generally viewed as quite active, it seems the level of diversity among those who wanted to maintain their current student assignment plan appeared to be a somewhat unusual occurrence nonetheless. At the height of the debate around whether or not the community would move to neighborhood schools, nearly 70% of those that voted in the public vote said that if they had a choice, they would choose to keep their current student assignment plan rather than one of the three neighborhood school plans that was proposed. Coupled with the statements made by these educators, it would be fair to assume that within a large portion of the Canton community, a culture exists where diversity and inclusiveness within public education are truly valued.
Community Leaders

Interestingly enough, among Canton’s community leaders, the idea of keeping their current student assignment plan in order to maintain current levels of diversity within the schools was simply not a primary topic of conversation. Although one or two participants from this group raised issues of diversity, they were generally embedded within discussions of resegregation of Canton’s schools if the law had actually been implemented.

Nevertheless it would seem that creating opportunities for students to experience diverse educational settings was an important concept for all participants, but only certain groups found it to be significant enough to challenge a return to neighborhood schools. As we will hear in chapter 7, neighborhood school supporters viewed other factors as far more important within this debate.
CHAPTER 6

“If It Isn’t Broken”

While issues of equity and diversity were predominate themes evident throughout this study, other issues surfaced that had far more to do with the nuts and bolts of returning to neighborhood schools. A third theme to emerge was the strong belief that the Canton School District was successful and therefore the current student assignment pattern did not need to be tinkered with. Within this theme, several different aspects actually appeared during interviews with opponents of the NSA, but all of them were related to maintaining the status quo because it worked. Discussed most often were the financial implications of returning to neighborhood schools, followed by discussions on the amount of disruption such a move would create for the community in general. Lastly, participants shared that the small size of the district did not warrant a change in student assignment patterns. Neighborhood school supporters were asked about these concerns and were more than willing to share their opinions as well. The remainder of this chapter will explore each of these areas in more detail as we gain a better understanding of why Canton’s residents either supported or opposed neighborhood schools.

*The Economics of Neighborhood Schools*

The aspect mentioned most often during interviews with suburban opponents of the NSA was the cost of implementing a neighborhood schools plan. Participants in this group tended to raise the issue of cost on their own during our conversations, arguing that a return to neighborhood schools was simply cost prohibitive. Surprisingly however, such a discussion was not as prevalent for Black parents or Canton’s educators as I had anticipated.
given their opposition to the NSA. In fact, very few of the participants actually raised the issue of money on their own. An examination of the transcribed interviews reveals that more often than not, it was the researcher who initiated discussions about money as participants were asked what other factors they considered in their decision to support maintaining the current student assignment patterns. In each instance, the question was asked only after participants first shared their primary reasons for not supporting the NSA and only if the economic implications of a return to neighborhood schools was not mentioned up to that point. Although there was some disagreement between neighborhood school supporters and those who wanted to keep the current plan as to how much returning to neighborhood schools would actually cost, by all accounts, there was a cost attached to such a plan. The figure most often cited by the school board was an estimated 2 million dollars for any of the three neighborhood school plans residents had to choose from. Generally speaking, participants addressed three primary issues within discussions on the financial implications of returning to neighborhood schools, areas we will explore a bit further in the following sections.

*Out With The Old In With The New*

Suburban opponents and educators alike most often raised the fact that moving to neighborhood schools necessarily meant that the district would either have to build new schools or renovate old ones in order to ensure that children would truly attend schools closest to their homes. What was most salient within these discussions for participants was the idea that Canton had just recently invested in the renovation of a number of schools within the district and would be forced to do so again if they moved to a neighborhood schools plan. Discussing her feelings on this issue, one suburban parent made the following comment,
I certainly know that when someone made mention of the amount of money it would cost, I said, oh for goodness sake…Not to say that spending a lot of money isn’t a good thing when they need to but we’ve already been through all of this.

As with many of the parents interviewed, educators voiced concerns as they presented the economic rationale for not supporting the NSA, but nearly all of them discussed the issue in much greater detail. Many participants specifically mentioned the fact that because the NSA required schools to have new grade configurations, buildings would have to be changed to meet those requirements. Schools that were previously designed for grades K-3 would now house students up through grade 5 or 6, necessitating changes in the height of the water fountains and toilets or the size of the desks for instance. As one educator put it,

I: So, some people have raised that the cost of each neighborhood school plan was too much…

S: Oh, the cost..many of the primary buildings have little tiny toilets, sinks and fountains so that if you do have older kids coming into the building then it’s problematic, whereas this building was not that way. We could go up to K-5 and it would not have been an issue structure wise, just a change in some things like desks. But that was a big money factor in all of this.

I: So though personally that came up for you, it doesn’t sound like it was at the top of your list?

S: It was a thought though because I was thinking 2.5 million dollars on this stuff and we are not spending it on teachers…that doesn’t make any sense.

That last sentiment was one that was noted in several interviews as participants discussed their perception that spending a large sum of money on renovations or purchasing new
materials (i.e. books, computers, and furniture) was entirely unnecessary. As several educators put it, the issue was not actually about spending money per se, but about spending money when it was not warranted. The assumption here is that 2.5 million dollars might not be viewed as too much money for the district to spend if it were being spent on something as important as hiring new teachers for instance. Others went even further as they questioned the rationale for moving to neighborhood schools, and noted that the district would actually be spending money to “end up with a situation that was worse than what you started with”. Finally one suburban parent summed it up this way, “I think keeping the current system was actually like half the cost…so yes, that was a major decision maker for me. Also, all of these bad ideas costing tons and tons of money….that was just ludicrous”.

It is particularly interesting to note that cost was not a significant factor for Black participants regardless of which side of the issue they were on. Those opposed to neighborhood schools all had the same response, summed up by one family this way, “I was prepared to have the taxes raised if necessary because I feel like to some degree you can’t have the things you want unless you pay into it”. These parents tended to follow that line of thought with the notion that once you split the cost up among residents, the price per family would most likely not be very high in the end. Neither of the neighborhood school supporters actually had any comments on the cost of such a move, while only one parent in all reported that the high price tag of doing so was an issue for her.

Perhaps not as surprising, however, was how neighborhood school supporters discussed the financial implications of returning to neighborhood schools. Most of the participants in this group, for example, didn’t see the cost of returning to neighborhood schools as a significant factor either. For the one private school parent interviewed, cost was
certainly not an issue given how much she currently pays for tuition. For other parents whose children are in the public school system, the predominate notion was that the elimination of busing would save the district money despite the board’s contention that moving to neighborhood schools would cost approximately $2 million dollars per plan. When asked about the $2 million price tag, one participant responded,

I: I heard from some parents that it would cost at least $2 million to return to neighborhood schools.

S: No, absolutely not because every time I looked at any kind of capital cost and then I looked at the transportation costs over the next 2 – 5 years it always gets recouped very quickly. So the transportation costs of the current plan I believe far exceed any capital investments.

I: Got it, so the cost of the neighborhood schools plan would still be less overall than what you all are putting out for busing currently?

S: Yes and they’re very careful not to include transportation costs in any of their…like they tend to segregate that out…they are sort of hiding it so that the public does not see how much they are spending on transportation.

I: So you think that’s just the perception the district has put forth for people?

S: Yes. I guess my perception also on the transportation costs is that other school districts that have gone back to neighborhood schools have such significant savings that they are actually getting the grants back from the government for saving their transportation money, so I think that’s further proof that the whole busing issue costs more.
As this parent shared her feelings about the way the district presents their transportation costs, she suggests that they hide the actual costs from the public. While I could not locate the exact dollar amount the Canton School District spends on transportation, it was relatively easy to find out the percentage of district funds that are spent on transportation. For the 2003-04 school year for instance, the state’s Department of Education website lists the expenditure for transportation as only 3.99% of the district’s total allocation. The large majority of district money (64.52%) funds student instruction, while the second largest expenditure (10.67%) is on operations and maintenance. Two things seem evident here, which are that the costs for transportation in Canton is certainly not hidden from the public, and that the district does not seem to be spending an inordinate amount of money busing its students. In fact, in relation to the other three districts involved in desegregation litigation, Canton spends the least on transportation. Davis, which is the largest of the four districts, spends 6.94% of their total expenditures on transportation, while Duncan and Smithville spend 5.35% and 4.56% respectively.

Another parent simply replied that she didn’t believe it would really cost two million dollars to return to neighborhood schools and made a point of noting that she heard that this figure was a “very biased view….not really true”. In any case, supporters readily point to the surrounding districts as an example of how Canton could be saving money by eliminating their buses, which brings us to the second way that the cost of neighborhood schools was discussed among participants in general.

*The Realities of Busing in Canton*

One of the primary reasons given by policy makers for returning to neighborhood schools was the idea that doing so would eliminate the need to bus students, therefore
reducing the length of time it takes students to get to school and saving the district money in the long run. While several parents raised this idea during their interviews, it seems that educators discussed it a bit more often. Each time the concept of busing arose for this group of participants, the same perceptions were presented. Canton educators shared that the elimination of busing was a fallacy that residents were presented with in an effort to gain support for the NSA from the outset. The reality as they present it is that some amount of busing would still be necessary because of the locations of specific schools within the district. In fact, some argue as parents did in earlier interviews, that in many ways the district already has a neighborhood school plan and therein lies their point. There are several neighborhoods, particularly within the city of Springdale itself where no schools actually exist, which according to these participants means that some of those children are in fact already attending the school closest to their home. Therefore even with a change in student assignment patterns and the possible elimination of busing for some students, others would continue to require transportation to get to their assigned school. As administrator put it,

It wasn’t a big deal here, so it just didn’t make sense to reorganize. There are still some places where there are no neighborhood schools so some kids would still be on the bus, period. We would not have been changing anything.

Among educators there seemed to be a belief that first off, very little money would actually be saved by returning to neighborhood schools given that busing would never be completely eliminated, and second, that most parents were unaware of that fact and simply assumed that busing would be eliminated in the end.
Neighborhood school supporters see it differently and point to the other three districts involved in litigation as an indication of what would happen upon returning to neighborhood schools. One supporter responded this way,

That’s not my understanding because they are saving a lot on busing. Duncan School District has implemented this and they saved a lot of money on busing and really what would the cost be…you already have schools with teachers, it’s just a matter of not busing people and just reconfiguring where kids would go, so it should be a cost savings.

Ted Jones also pointed out that other districts were saving money with the elimination of busing, noting, “Duncan did it, they said ok we accept this and as they forecasted, they’re saving several hundred thousand dollars per year.”

The reality is that these participants are not wrong. According to the district’s own figures, they would save money on transportation if they returned to neighborhood schools, just as others have. They list the annual savings on transportation in each of the three proposed neighborhood school plans as anywhere from $239,775 to $501,377 (Voter’s Guide, 2001). But the Canton School District noted that there is much more to the story. While acknowledging savings in this particular area, they argue that the creation of high poverty schools essentially cancels out the savings in transportation because of the tremendous amount of money that would need to be poured into these schools to ensure students’ academic success. This is particularly significant they argue given that the No Child Left Behind Act holds districts accountable for failing schools. Pointing to the need for additional resources which include but are not limited to teacher incentives, increased social services, additional professional development for teachers, class size reduction and
extended school days, the district noted that the expense for such ongoing educational inputs for high poverty schools far exceeds the amount of money they would save with the elimination of busing.

It appears that while neighborhood school supporters are accurate in their perception that the elimination of busing would save the district money, they fail to consider the full picture. During earlier discussions on issues of equity, we heard this group of participants say that it was the district’s responsibility to equalize the schools so that Black students would not be forced to attend inferior schools if the district returned to neighborhood schools. Though discussions about how the district might go about doing that were outside the limits of this study, it would be interesting to hear how they would answer that question. While the district seems to have given this question a great deal of thought as they developed their response to the NSA, neighborhood schools supporters do not appear to have done the same.

In any case, there are clear disagreements between supporters and opponents on the issue of transportation savings had Canton not maintained their current student assignment plan. In the end, several participants said that the cost of returning to neighborhood schools was not a major factor in their decision to oppose such a move because they simply didn’t see it happening given the economic implications. One assistant principal summed it up this way,

I thought it was economically not a feasible idea. I did not even believe that there was a possibility it would happen…not from the door. Even with the public forums and information, and newspapers, I never thought it was possible…it didn’t make
sense financially. So when people said it’s going to happen, I said how are they going to pull that off.

*One Size Doesn’t Fit All*

An aspect mentioned nearly as much as the economic implications of returning to neighborhood schools was that Canton is the smallest of the four school districts involved in this debate. In fact, this idea was most often raised during conversations about the cost of neighborhood schools because it was viewed by opponents as one of the primary reasons that they didn’t need to change their student assignment pattern. Essentially those who opposed neighborhood schools argued that because of the compact size of Canton, their students are not generally subjected to lengthy bus rides and are not traveling on major interstates, two circumstances that several of the other districts must contend with. So it begs the question of whether a neighborhood schools law is actually necessary for every district or rather for those with more valid transportation concerns. In one conversation about the size of the district and subsequent bus rides, a building administrator shares her feelings about the issue,

S: I think the neighborhood school piece has more of an effect for the other, larger districts than for Canton which is very compact. We dismiss here at 2:50 and most of my kids are home by 3:10.

I: Oh that is short…

S: So you can drive in your car and get anywhere in the district in about 10 minutes or so.

I: So that’s what makes Canton unique in the first place?

S: Yes, it’s very compact…
I: Which I have a feeling is a major part of this story…that you all didn’t have all that far to go.

S: Yes, right within five minutes of this building there is another elementary school.

There are like 3 schools within a 15 mile radius of each other.

This particular school is one of the elementary schools located in the suburbs where a quick drive through the area confirms how close this school is to several others in that part of the community. An educator from one of the three high schools shared his feelings as well, noting,

There is absolutely no reason to change anything in Canton at all. Now go to Davis where the kids have to go from the city down I-35, down Route 62, and that is a whole other discussion and you get a different argument, but in this district I have kids that walk a mile, some close to 2 miles…most of my kids can walk to their house.

For this reason alone, educators interviewed did not believe that these short bus rides warranted a return to neighborhood schools.

Suburban White parents who opposed the NSA shared the exact same sentiments as Canton’s educators. Interestingly enough, Black parents who opposed the law raised a concern not mentioned by anyone else in the study. They tended to agree with other participants who noted that the Canton School District is much smaller than the three other districts involved in this debate, and therefore the students do not endure the same long bus rides that students from those communities do. Black parents did however point out that having to be on the bus so early in the morning posed some safety risks for children in the city most specifically, as some of them are residing in neighborhoods that are not considered
especially safe. Again, we hear this idea of Black families having to consider additional factors within this debate that simply do not exist for others.

As I asked neighborhood school supporters where they stood on this issue, they actually did not have much to say about it. In fact, they agreed that Canton’s students are not on the bus for as long as they are in the other districts, nor are they traveling on the interstates. Instead, these participants spoke mostly about the fact that they either just didn’t want their children having to go to school outside of their own neighborhoods or about how awful it was that the city kids have to spend so much time on the bus given that they are bused for a longer period of time than their own children. One parent did however discuss these concerns a bit more specifically as she responded to the question of how the small size of the district factored into her decision to support neighborhood schools. She noted,

Well that’s the thing, if my son were to ride the bus he would have to catch it at 7:30 in the morning and it doesn’t get to school until 8:15...for a school that’s only 4 minutes away. They are spending more time actually picking up all of the kids. With my older son, the bus driver is letting him off so he can just go home and he does not have to pass us for 15 minutes and then come back.

Without a doubt, those opposed to neighborhood schools raised this same issue, but did not see it as a reason to change the current plan, whereas supporters argue that it is reason enough to return to neighborhood schools.

Disruption One Way or Another

We know that parents and educators who opposed the neighborhood schools law raised concerns about the financial implications of such a plan. We also know that because the district is so compact relative to the surrounding communities, Canton’s students are not
taking lengthy bus rides nor traveling on highways, the two primary reasons to consider a move to neighborhood schools as participants saw it. As participants discussed why they felt there was no need to return to neighborhood schools in Canton there was one additional aspect addressed. Opponents believed that moving to neighborhood schools would be especially disruptive to the community. For White suburban parents for instance, the cost of implementing neighborhood schools was closely linked to the disruption of implementation as well. Essentially, the feeling was that returning to neighborhood schools would create a significant degree of disruption without much benefit for the district in the long run. Once this community was given the information about the impact of a return to neighborhood schools, the idea that such a transition would not result in better conditions, improved achievement, significantly shorter bus rides, or transportation savings meant that these parents viewed the disruption it would create as something that was entirely unnecessary. Addressing this issue specifically, one of the participants noted, “….at that point it didn’t make any sense because people weren’t going to benefit…it did not make sense to disrupt the whole plan”.

Several educators noted that they have already undergone transitions as they moved between buildings when earlier renovations were completed on several of their schools. Although all agree that they came out of these experiences just fine in the end, they admit that such transitions were disruptive to both students and teachers. In a conversation with one principal, she discussed why the community didn’t wish to change their student assignment patterns in the following way,

I: Now did disruption play a part in this for you at all, some people have raised that?
S: Yeah, it’s always there anytime you have a change like that…getting parents ready, getting children ready, etc. Theirs is a trickle down effect of the disruption that you’d have.

I: Did you hear other principals saying the same thing?

S: Most people I was around felt that you don’t do change just to change it. We all felt like we had a good system, both grade configurations and the city/suburban assignments…it’s working. And nobody wanted to go through an upheaval like that because somebody out there who knows nothing about what goes on in here wanted it done.

To be sure, this was not the only participant who believed that policy makers who had no real knowledge of how things currently worked were forcing this disruption upon them. Others mentioned that they would be willing to endure this kind of transition if there were a valid reason to do so.

Black parents appeared to be split on whether or not returning to neighborhood schools was going to be disruptive for the community. While most parents said that this did not factor into their decision in any way, some noted that changing the pattern now would be quite disruptive for students and one family went so far as to point out the disruption it would have on the sports teams in particular. As anticipated, neighborhood schools supporters did not view returning to neighborhood schools as a process that would be very disruptive to the community. Participants from this group argued that while there may be some initial disruption during the first year, in the long run returning to neighborhood schools would be far less disruptive than the plan they currently have where students have to transition to a new school four different times during their K-12 experience. For them, the idea of keeping
children in schools for a longer period of time far outweighed the minimal disruption the district would have to endure as they made the shift to neighborhood schools. Disruption it would seem was clearly a non-issue for neighborhood school supporters.

So, for opponents of neighborhood schools, the economic implications, the small size of the district, and the amount of disruption that would occur were the secondary reasons they presented for not supporting the NSA. Generally speaking, the argument was that there is nothing wrong with their current system, which they view as successful. Why then would they implement such a major change in their student assignment patterns when there is no valid reason to do so? On the other hand, neighborhood school supporters counter each of those arguments either citing examples from other districts (i.e. transportation savings) or pointing out that the multiple transitions students endure in the present system is far more disruptive than a one time shift to a new plan which would allow for more stability in the long run. Finally, there was not a great deal of discussion among community leaders about these three areas. While they did note the compactness of the Canton School District in relation to several of the other districts involved in litigation, none of these issues turned out to be a primary focus within that set of interviews.
CHAPTER 7

The Other Side of the Coin

As we examine the process that took place in the Canton community during the period of time they developed their response to the NSA, it is important to hear from those who supported a return to neighborhood schools. While much of what we have heard is from parents and educators who opposed the new law, with responses to those arguments from neighborhood school supporters, this group of participants had their own reasons for supporting the NSA. Though interviews with opponents went very smoothly, I experienced a bit more anxiety about this set of interviews given that these participants were already identified as residents who opposed busing. As much I wanted to remain open to hearing what these parents had to say, my own beliefs about the negative consequences of returning to neighborhood schools are fairly well developed. I do, however understand why parents would want neighborhood schools given that the concept itself is certainly a good one. Given this, I believe that I was able to conduct these particular interviews with the same level of sensitivity demonstrated in interviews with participants whose views were more similar to my own, but I would add that I paid more attention to ensuring that this was actually the case.

As with previous interviews, several themes emerged from conversations with neighborhood school supporters regarding the why part of this story, but as one might anticipate, they were very different themes. For the most part, ideas of resegregation, diversity, disruption, and cost, themes that were very prominent for those opposed to neighborhood schools, did not surface in interviews with neighborhood school supporters until they were raised by the researcher. For this group of parents, the two primary themes
that emerged which explain why they chose to support the NSA are what I will call community linkages and respect for the law. These concepts arose time and again during the interviews and without a doubt, point to their significance within this story.

*Community Linkages*

One of primary reasons neighborhood school supporters were in favor of the NSA was their belief that when students attend schools in their own neighborhoods, critical relationships are developed and nurtured that ultimately enhance individual and community development. As readers will hear, participants within this group felt very strongly about the idea that neighborhood schools build communities in a way that Canton’s current student assignment plan could never do. Within this theme, there were two very significant discussions taking place among participants, each of which will be explored in greater detail below.

*The Good Old Days*

Upon beginning interviews with neighborhood school supporters, one of the first things to become evident was *how* they discussed the concept of neighborhood schools. Almost immediately, some parents began to talk about what one might refer to as the “good old days” as they expressed the desire to have their children attend schools within their own neighborhoods. Several participants discussed their own history with attending neighborhood schools and recalled the positive experiences they had in doing so. For these parents, the decision to support the NSA was very connected to these earlier experiences as they voiced their support for neighborhood schools because “that’s the way it was when they went to school and that’s how it should be”. One of the first discussions around this particular topic went this way,
I: So how did you decide to support neighborhood schools?

S: The main factor I think was my childhood, I grew up in public schools, my parents taught public school, my husband went to a public school and both his parents work in education. You know to me it was just the way it should be…now you know it was different. I grew up in a different area, a definite suburb that was a small city, so it only had schools in that city and you went to whatever was closest and I could walk to school in that city. I walked to elementary, middle and high school. We had kids who were bused in from the city, but we were never forced to be bused out.

I: It sounds like you had a positive experience then…

S: Right, and then if you wanted to play with your friends after school and when you are younger you could walk to your friend’s house to play…you and your friends can walk to school…

I: So I think I hear you saying that community or relationships are really why you believe we should go back to neighborhood schools?

S: Right, I walked to school with the same girl for 12 years.

I: So neighborhood schools allows you to build relationships whereas if you are out and about all over, you don’t get that.

S: Right…

Another parent expressed her feelings as she discussed why she supported neighborhood schools and described a similar background as she noted the following,

My feeling is that I know that society has changed drastically in terms of parents walking and things like that, but I do remember walking to school with
my friends. We all went to the same school and there was just this close community unit and we don’t have that. I don’t see it as a teacher and I don’t see it as a parent. I like neighborhood schools, I grew up that way, I saw how it worked. You know all the kids went to school together… we go to the swimming pool [now] and I meet people living two blocks away that I don’t even know. Whereas when I was growing up we all went to the same pool, hung out with the same people. I know it’s a different world but I remember walking to school with my brother and a couple kids from the street and we all walked together. Everybody looked out for each other. If it was raining, someone could come and pick up the whole group, and I know it’s a different time and we may never see that…

From these statements, we can almost picture these parents as children walking to school with their friends and family, the sense of nostalgia being quite palpable. They consider neighborhood schools as the ideal model of public education and see no reason to do things differently some twenty years later despite admissions that times have changed. Although not always articulated clearly, I realized early on that these participants are actually alluding to something more significant than a simple longing to go back to the way things were. Upon further probing, much of what these parents presented was essentially the idea that neighborhood schools helps build a sense of community. When asked what they heard other parents saying about neighborhood schools for instance another parent responded with this,

I think because I have lived here all this time, I have a lot of people who’ve gone through the same things I did…and I think that we all miss neighborhood schools. That in a day and age when our lives are so hectic and so busy it would be nice if you had a 2nd grader and a 5th grader to be able to pick them up together, from the same
building. When I go back to [teaching] full time, we’ll all have the same hours but will be at three different schools and my husband works in Rosedale so that doesn’t help at all. But if you’re in neighborhood schools, you can share some of that and switch picking up each other’s kids and that kind of thing.

Participants echoed these sentiments in various ways throughout the interviews as they expressed their opinions about the law and their disappointment with the final outcome within the Canton School District. For them, having children attend schools within their own neighborhood allows for the development of meaningful community linkages in a way that Canton’s current student assignment plan simply does not provide. As they see it, the community ties and supports that they had access to during their own schooling experiences are considered to be valuable resources that are essential to building both better individuals and better communities. Moreover, these neighborhood school supporters argue that the kind of relationship building that takes place when children go to schools closest to their homes reaches beyond relationships among residents and extends to relationships between residents and the schools themselves.

_The Importance of Parental Partnerships_

The idea that neighborhood schools build linkages between families and schools was most evident in discussions about parent involvement. Participants were united in their belief that sending children to schools in their own neighborhood results in higher levels of parent involvement, as one after another they shared their feelings about the importance of parent involvement in public school education. As one parent discussed her belief that Canton’s current student assignment plan places a great deal of stress on students because of the
amount of time they spend traveling to and from schools located outside of their neighborhoods, the conversation moved toward issues of parental involvement,

S: Also for after school things like Brownies…last year they just met at the school and now I have to drive her across town, it not only adds to her day, but it adds such stressful logistics…so that’s the biggest thing. And helping out in school…

I: Would you say that is about parent involvement?

S: Child stress would be one and parent involvement would be two…and just a feeling of community I guess would be number three. The parents when they picked up the kids would stand around and talk and compare notes, collect money for the teacher’s gift, or say “hey, what did you think of last night’s homework”? Evening things are also easier to get to when they’re closer, so there is a sense of community…of seeing the parents. Now I’m not seeing parents, they drop their kids off at the bus stop. I was talking to teachers more…it was a feeling of community when we were going to the school right here.

I: And you would say then that neighborhood schools helps that happen…it builds that kind of community cohesiveness and parent involvement?

S: You read so much…you know there was an article in the paper the other day about parent involvement being the biggest predictor of a child’s success later on, and I think that neighborhood schools keeps it so that parents can be involved, can be connected and just makes it easier…that ultimately helps the child.

While this group of parents feels that the current student assignment plan does not promote parental involvement within the district as a whole, the more dominant component of this argument was by far the idea that the current plan does not meet the needs of families
who live in the city in particular – namely lower income Blacks. Participants were very vocal about their feelings, noting what they see as an obvious difference in the level of parental involvement within this specific population. They argue that the lower level of parental involvement among parents residing in the city is directly related to the fact that their children do not attend schools in their own neighborhoods. Within these conversations, participants tended to point to several issues related to attending schools that are outside of one’s neighborhood which center on very concrete issues such as the availability of transportation to more intangible concerns like feeling a sense of belonging. One mother shared the following story as she discussed her rationale for supporting neighborhood schools,

I can see why the people from the city would want their children to go to school in the city…here is a perfect example. Just a month ago when I had the conference for my son, I got to talking to a lady that was in the hall and she had a handicap…it took her two hours to get to the school. When we got done with the conferences, she asked if I could take her to a bus stop. I ended up driving her home because I thought that was awful for her to have to wait 2 hours to get to the school and who knows how long it was going to take her to get home. And it took maybe 5-10 minutes in a car to take her home.

While her point was certainly clear, what was of particular interest to me, was that I didn’t get the sense from our interview that she actually heard city parents expressing a desire to return to neighborhood schools. In fact, just after my response to her comments, her husband asked whether I had spoken with Black families yet and whether or not they were interested in neighborhood schools, which suggests that they have not necessarily had discussions with
this particular group. It may be safe to assume, however, that during her interactions at the school she has more contact with parents from the city than her husband does, and as a result has had more conversations with parents from the city about the issue.

Expressing similar concerns about the inability of city parents to fully participate in their child’s education given the current student assignment plan, another parent went a step further and raised the idea that students suffer socially as well. She noted the following,

I feel bad for parents who live in the city who don’t have cars…and some people can’t afford a car. We are not seeing them at bingo night, they can’t come to the teacher conferences. As a matter of fact, I’m homeroom mom in my daughter’s class and they obviously feel disenfranchised. I am noticing that the people who wanted to be on the class roster that we distribute for birthday parties are all people that live in the two zip codes right around here. We are not having them contribute to the class gift. They obviously don’t feel a part of it…it’s like, “oh our kids go to school somewhere far away”, it’s not the same feeling that they are a part of it.

The one participant who was both a parent and a teacher in the district echoed this sentiment as she said,

When I was teaching 2nd grade we talked a lot about how to get the city parents involved…to provide transportation even. And I felt like they just didn’t feel as welcome, like they were coming to “our” building, not theirs. And we bent over backwards and nothing we did worked. I just think they had that feeling…almost like going to the opposing team’s school. Enemy ground is too strong, but certainly on someone else’s turf.
Neighborhood school supporters in this study appear to be quite concerned about the consequences of not having neighborhood schools for all children, but particularly for poor children and children of color. We can see from discussions about their own backgrounds that while they seem to be saying that neighborhood schools help build community cohesiveness in general, they suggest that attending schools outside of one’s neighborhood is perhaps even more detrimental to children with fewer resources at the start. Why is it that they do not describe similar feelings of alienation, for instance, when their own children attend schools outside of their neighborhood during the three years they are bused to schools down in the city?

One obvious answer is that suburban families clearly do not have difficulty getting into the city to attend parent-teacher conferences or evening activities. The more interesting answer however is related to the social alienation that has been described. Although it was not addressed in the interviews, one cannot help but wonder how often the suburban families wish to attend social events for children who reside in the city. What is more, birthday parties while appearing to be a natural and expected event in suburban communities may not even be occurring with such regularity for children with fewer resources. Finally, we cannot overlook the fact that there is a significant difference in the number of years these children spend in schools outside of their own communities. City children spend the majority of their K-12 years attending schools in someone else’s community, and therefore may feel like “outsiders” for longer periods of time. Suburban students on the other hand, may view their three years in the city as merely a temporary circumstance and one which can be offset by the connections and resources they are bound to have both before and after their 4th, 5th and 6th grade years in the city schools.
It should be noted here that in response to the member checks conducted at the end of data analysis, one participant had some concerns about my interpretation of why neighborhood school supporters did not want their children going to the intermediate schools in the city. She argues that they are concerned with the negative environment within one school in particular rather than the actual location of the schools. Noting for instance the large size of the building, the number of fights that take place within it and the inadequateness of the school’s playground, she commented that it was not an appropriate setting for children in this age group. This parent did acknowledge however that the other two 4th – 6th grade schools do not raise as many of the same concerns for parents as they are smaller buildings which seem to be more suitable for young children.

Regardless of whether parents point to alleviating transportation difficulties or to reducing alienation, ultimately they make a compelling argument for viewing neighborhood schools as a way to build community. Of course, developing community linkages wasn’t the only reason participants supported the NSA as we will learn in the following section.

But it’s the Law...

Neighborhood school supporters were very clear about their desire to return to neighborhood schools because doing so helps residents develop networks within their own communities. Even more interesting, perhaps, is how strongly this group of participants believed that the Canton community would return to neighborhood schools because the law said they should. Once the NSA was passed in the spring of 2000, supporters of neighborhood schools assumed that the district would implement a neighborhood school plan in a timely manner. It honestly never occurred to this group of residents that the law could be challenged and that the request to continue the current student assignment pattern would
be accepted by the State Board of Education. Throughout the interviews, the sense of shock and disappointment these participants felt was especially evident. Responding to a question regarding how he learned about the NSA, one participant had this to say,

I: Do you remember how you first heard about the law?
S: Actually the local legislator, Ted Jones is a customer of ours and he started talking to me about it and what would I think about it.
I: So this was actually before the law?
S: Yeah and there were meetings about which I have to admit we did not go to and everybody wanted it because I would talk to customers...just general conversations, everybody seemed so excited about it. I may have talked to just the right people but it seemed like it was going to be a pushover. And the legislator would tell me when he would go to these meetings that there was this pocket of people who was really fighting against it, and so that is how we first heard about it and then it finally got passed and that was great...we thought, ok here we go. And some time went by and I guess I thought there was some grace period before they had to put it into play and then I didn’t really understand it but there were some other meetings and people opposed it. It was like a second run and it got turned down...I didn’t understand, I thought it was a done deal.

I: Right, that is what I am starting to hear...folks saying they assumed because it was a law that it meant it was going to happen.

Another participant expressed a similar reaction saying, “I was shocked when this came up on the ticket for the referendum, shocked that they were allowed to do that”. She is referring of course to the fact that the issue was even allowed to be put to a vote, however non-binding
it was, given that a law had already been passed that mandated a return to neighborhood schools. Both of these parents expressed clear surprise that despite such a law, additional action could be taken in an effort to prevent the return to neighborhood schools.

During one interview, one particular supporter went beyond the idea that the Canton community should return to neighborhood schools because a law was passed and voiced concerns about what kind of message was being given to students within the district by not actually obeying the law. Specifically she noted this,

It was the law…and that is what is incomprehensible to me. What are they teaching our children? This is the law and you have to follow the law…you know, there are shades of gray in everything but bottom line is none of us want our kids to grow up and be in jail. You have got to respect certain things in life because it’s about respect….what the police are saying, you have got to respect our president, the law. And our school district is making up laws about it. Like I was talking to my babysitters and other high schoolers at the time and the school district was making no bones about saying we have got to get around this law. I am thinking what are they teaching impressionable children…so it’s clear because it was the law. A law was passed and everyone was required to follow it and everyone else has and it hasn’t been easy for some districts like Smithville and Duncan. I think they are really struggling with it but they have been saving money. I think whenever you spend time and resources focusing on how kids are going to be educated and coming up with an innovative approach, the kids are going to benefit. They spent time and did the work, and it has not been easy, but it never occurred to them to say we should get around the law…[Canton] tried to find a loophole.
These sentiments seem to suggest that neighborhood school supporters may not have had a realistic understanding of the political process as it stands. The presumption that the community would return to neighborhood schools simply because the law was passed overlooks a crucial piece of the legislation itself – the hardship clause. Recall that one component of the NSA was that school districts could submit an alternative plan if they felt that a neighborhood schools plan would create undue hardship to students and their families or to the district. Ted Jones, the author of the NSA, shared that when they were getting the law passed, they accepted an amendment from the Governor who was running for the U.S. Senate and interested in signing a neighborhood schools law because it was popular. He notes, however, that the amendment, which “had some weasel words in it” weakened the NSA in the end. He is specifically referring to this hardship clause, sharing that the State Board of Education was never fully behind the law and “was only too happy to embrace that and help Canton and Duncan avoid this”. So, the very presence of such a clause means that an automatic return to neighborhood schools was never a guarantee for any of the four districts involved in litigation.

This would surely not be the first time that compromises were made in order to ensure the passage of a law. In fact, compromises were made in the Brown case in an effort to ensure its unanimous passage, compromises which some have argued weakened that legislation as well (Kluger, 1976). Given the increasing divisiveness of the Canton neighborhood schools debate as time went on, it is hardly surprising that when given the opportunity, politicians throughout the state began to rethink their initial passage of the law. Several legislators went on record to say that they were willing to revisit the law and support changes in light of the perceived difficulties with its implementation and the results of the
public vote (Sobek, 2001). Presumably familiar with this kind of political process in the U.S., perhaps neighborhood school supporters should have been a bit more prepared for an alternative outcome. Other White suburban residents on the other hand seem to have had a very clear understanding of the process, utilizing it rather effectively in their pursuit to maintain the current system of busing, despite Jones’ public denouncements of their attempts to circumvent the law. Once again, it is important to note that the White suburban population in Canton is far from homogenous, as the two sides appeared to think quite differently about the politics involved in the neighborhood schools debate.

There is another component here that is compelling as well which is embedded within the comments of that last parent. As she herself noted, spending time and resources to develop innovative approaches that focus on how students are going to be educated ultimately benefits children. Based on the process that took place in Canton as the board and the community responded to the NSA, one might argue that this is precisely what they did. Disseminating a tremendous volume of information to the public most likely led to the mobilization of large numbers of Canton residents who in the end opposed the law. Armed with the results of a public vote confirming that residents opposed neighborhood schools along with a plethora of data on the consequences of creating high poverty schools within the district, we know that the board subsequently requested that the current plan be considered as their neighborhood schools plan – a request that was ultimately granted. To many observers, these actions would surely be considered an “innovative approach” designed and implemented to ensure that all children within the district receive equal educational opportunities.
As we listen to the voices of neighborhood school supporters, one gets a clear sense of the issues that were most salient for them. For this group of parents the idea that neighborhood schools promote community cohesion and a strong conviction that residents should follow the letter of the law are the primary reasons that the Canton School District should have returned to neighborhood schools. As they point out, their community is the only one of the four districts originally involved in desegregation litigation to “ignore the law”. One is left to wonder then whether these parents will take on this cause in the future or move on to another issue altogether.
CHAPTER 8

The Mobilization Process

Whereas the themes outlined in the last three chapters allow us to understand why parents, educators, and community leaders opposed the NSA, themes presented in this chapter will provide readers with a foundation for understanding exactly how they became mobilized to do so. Moreover, the ideas presented here will shed light on where neighborhood school supporters were positioned within this process and explain how that contributed to Canton’s ability to maintain their current student assignment plan despite a legal mandate to return to neighborhood schools. The themes that emerged in this area address two key issues, leadership and empowerment, but the way that these concepts were discussed among various participant groups was quite different. In any case as we will hear, both of these concepts played a central role in the Canton story. Finally, situating the process that took place in this community within the empowerment and social movement literature further helps readers understand the conditions under which one can engender widespread support for the continuation of a student assignment plan which maintains a community’s current level of racial and economic diversity.

Leadership

Ideas of leadership were raised both by participants and by the researcher during these interviews. Some individuals spoke about the leadership of the school district, the legislator who authored the NSA, or community leaders from the moment the interview began, while others discussed it only after they were asked about their perceptions of leadership within the community. Regardless of how the issue of leadership was raised
initially, however, everyone seemed to have an opinion about it and most participants agreed that it was the extraordinary leadership of particular individuals within the community that laid the groundwork for this very unique process to occur.

*The District’s Role*

As we know the process that took place as Canton was responding to the NSA was certainly a dynamic one. By all accounts the school board and school district played a significant role in that process. Examining the perceptions of various groups of residents about the district’s efforts here is essential if we are to gain a full understanding of what took place in this community. In the following sections, readers will listen in as groups of participants share their feelings about the leadership of the district in particular.

*Providing the platform for suburban opposition*

Among White suburban parents who opposed the NSA, one of the first things to become clear was that parents viewed the leadership of the school district as absolutely instrumental in maintaining the current student assignment plan. The most common sentiment among these parents was that the district led the charge by providing the information they needed to make an informed decision about which effort to support. During a discussion specifically about the district’s leadership, one parent responded, “…And I think part of what worked so well here is that they made so much effort to keep the public as informed as possible at all times”. For most of the parents interviewed, the sheer volume of material disseminated to the Canton community through public forums, district newsletters, the Voter’s Guide, letters from individual schools, PTA meetings, and the cable TV spots, were clear indications of school board and school district leadership in the effort to maintain their current plan.
Given the respondents’ feedback about the district’s leadership in this process, I began to ask participants whether they perceived the district as advocates for a position on the issue or as neutral disseminators of information. One of the more active parents explained how difficult it was to say whether or not the school board presented a particular position to the public on this issue because she has close relationships with some of its members. Although she admits that she was aware of their individual opinions about neighborhood schools, she finally says that they tried hard to remain neutral on the issue, which interestingly enough is not quite the perception other parents had. One participant responded to this question saying,

In my mind, they were clear that [neighborhood schools] was something they weren’t interested in…it seemed like they were clear about that from the beginning…that we’ve got a system that works, why would we take that apart, it doesn’t make sense.

Although most of the participants reported that they believed the district was in favor of keeping the current plan, one parent in this group did respond that she wasn’t sure about how the district viewed the NSA or about who was actually leading the charge to challenge it. Nevertheless, the central theme to emerge from White suburban participants who opposed the NSA was that the district played a crucial leadership role in this process.

While it is clear that the leadership of the district played a critical role in how this group of parents became organized to challenge a return to neighborhood schools, it is interesting to note that when asked whether they thought this challenge would have occurred without such leadership, the responses were mixed. Several parents felt that the NSA would not have been implemented in Canton regardless of the district’s efforts. One parent noted the following,
I: What I’m wondering is had they not done what they did, give all of this information to the community, etc. would this have been a community that said “ok” and just gone with it [neighborhood schools]?

S: And just gone along with it? I don’t think so…no I think that people would’ve responded to that. Not that you always see massive turnouts anywhere, but I think when issues have come up that involved the schools and the school board, you know people go to the board meetings and write letters to the editor, people speak up at PTA, people send emails…so parents will certainly take on issues of their own.

Another participant however seemed certain that had the district not taken the lead during this process, the community would have gone back to neighborhood schools. She responded this way,

I: Do you get the sense that without the district leadership this same process would have occurred?

S: No.

I: Ok, tell me what your sense is about that.

S: Even though I was willing to jump in and take a leadership position and drive things, I couldn’t have done that if the district hadn’t provided a platform for it. If they hadn’t done what they did and set it up like they did with the public forums and then the vote…they gave us something to shoot for…to work toward.

So although White suburban parents remain divided on whether or not neighborhood schools would have actually been implemented without the district’s involvement, they nevertheless understand the important role that the district played in this process in general.
Taking a stand: District support for black parents

We know that White suburban parents who opposed the NSA had particular opinions on the role that the district played throughout this process. The story becomes more interesting however as we add to it and explore what others had to say about leadership as well. As with other groups of participants Black parents were asked where they thought the school district was situated throughout this process. While they generally did not have as much to say as White participants on either side of the issue, they did voice opinions on whether or not they viewed the district as leading this process. In almost every interview, Black participants noted that the Canton School District played a key role in the process that took place during that 2001-2002 school year as the districts responded to the NSA. Most of the parents interviewed believed that the district not only played a major leadership role by providing a tremendous amount of information to Canton residents about the issue but also believed that the district firmly opposed neighborhood schools. One participant had this to say,

I think they wanted to keep the plan they had…you heard people talking about it and they gave out a lot of information that let you know what was going on. They kept you very informed about what was going on.

As I asked whether there would have been a return to neighborhood schools had the district not been involved and not disseminated such a large volume of information, Black parents generally believed that without all of that involvement, neighborhood schools would have been implemented within Canton. One parent summed it up this way, “if the information hadn’t been dissected and broken down into laymen’s terms, it would have
absolutely gone back to neighborhood schools”. Clearly participants in this group perceived the district’s actions as instrumental in preventing a return to neighborhood schools.

*The view from within: Canton educators and district leadership*

Just as Canton educators were clear about the reasons they did not choose to support the Neighborhood Schools Act, they easily discussed how the process of responding to the NSA occurred within their community. As with other participant groups, a primary component within these discussions was the exploration of where the school district was situated as the story unfolded. Most of the educators interviewed also viewed the district as the primary force behind the effort to maintain their current student assignment plan. One elementary school vice principal responded to the question of where the district was situated throughout the process with the following comments,

I: How did you perceive the district in this whole process?

S: In this process I couldn’t have asked for more…

I: So you really saw them as leading the way?

S: Without question…we lead the way for the state. You know here in Canton, we’re already there, there’s nothing to do here. We like what we’re doing, there is no need to change this.

I: You did not see the district as neutral on this issue?

S: It was not neutral…it was very, very proactive and very open about telling everybody what their position was.

As with this participant, many of the educators viewed the district as openly opposing the NSA. Several other participants, however, perceived them as fairly neutral on the issue. One teacher shared this during our interview,
I: Did you get a sense that they had an opinion or preference one way or the other?

S: I really think that if they had one they didn’t really say…they kept talking about neighborhood schools but they knew that we didn’t want to go back to that and they had parents that didn’t want it either. They came and just gave us the facts and said you have to make up your mind, we’re not going to tell you which one to pick…and if they did have a preference they didn’t share it.

I: So you saw them as neutral?

S: Yeah, they didn’t say one way or the other. They were listening to what people were saying and then went with that.

Canton’s educators, though certainly opposed to the NSA clearly did not seem to be in agreement regarding the district’s position during the time they were developing a response to the law. Moreover, they were not in full agreement about whether the NSA would have been implemented in the end without the district’s leadership. While some believe that Canton parents would have challenged the neighborhood schools law regardless of the district’s efforts, other educators feel that many of Canton’s residents would have agreed to return to neighborhood schools because the idea of having children go to the schools closest to their homes would have simply been too appealing to pass up without additional information about the implication of doing so. One vice principal explained that parents are too well informed to have let neighborhood schools go through, noting this,

I: So you are also clear that the district had a real hand in all of this? I’m trying to figure out whether or not this would have just gone over people’s heads had the district been less involved…what’s your sense of that?

S: It would not have happened in this community.
I: Why not?

S: Our antennas go up, there is too much parental involvement, there are too many knowledgeable people here. Education is very important here… they would not have acquiesced.

Others answered this question very differently, noting that in part the answer depends on which population we are discussing. One of the principals for instance suggested that neighborhood schools would have absolutely been implemented had it been up to parents in the community where his school is located. He responded with this,

S: It would have…I think it would have.

I: Oh you think it would have really …that people would not have paid much attention to the issue and neighborhood schools would have just slid into effect so to speak?

S: I find that in the Deerwood community, the ones I deal with here, the buck stops with me. They do not…they are not the ones to go running downtown to the district. I only have a few parents who ever call my superior because of something…they are still very intimidated by the whole process.

I: Where as the Canton Ridge parents…what I seem to be hearing is…

S: They usually skip the principal (*laughter from both subject and interviewer*).

I: Right and what I hear is that this would not have gone right over their heads….that particular community would have said no….they’re active enough that even without the leadership of the district, they probably would not have let this go through. It’s interesting that Deerwood may have, but you are talking about a different group of people here…
S: I remember the vote was pretty close here, not a landslide against neighborhood schools like in other areas. I think it was critical …the communication and the open forums and getting it out in everybody’s faces, because I think it would have gone the other way had all of that not happened.

Despite the feelings of this participant and several others like him, most of the educators interviewed believe that the law would not have been implemented even had the district not been so proactive.

*The search for loopholes*

Neighborhood school supporters of course weighed in on the process that took place in Canton as they responded to the NSA. Not surprisingly, they were particularly vocal about the role of the school district and the school board in this process. This group of participants conveyed that the board played a critical role in how the community responded to the NSA, but unlike the case with those opposed to neighborhood schools, there was a very clear consensus that the board was in no way neutral on the issue. During interviews with neighborhood supporters, the idea that the district sought to maintain Canton’s current student assignment plan by any means necessary was quite prevalent. For instance, one parent had this to say about the district,

I think they made up their minds early on and they rigged a vote it is sad to say. I feel like I am in some weird conspiracy theory movie saying this, but it became clear talking to teenagers and to teachers that the administration made it clear that they did not want neighborhood schools and they found a loophole. They were talking to seniors, sending them letters saying your taxes are going to go up if we implement
neighborhood schools based on who knows what…but they were scaring people. The Canton School District has become oddly political and you don’t see that role for a district, but they influenced it and they decided what they wanted and how they were going to do it.

This parent’s statement that taxes would go up “based on who knows what” is certainly something we may want to stop and explore a bit. According the Voter’s Guide that was distributed to each household in Canton, while the law required the legislature to provide funds to each district to assist with the implementation of neighborhood schools, this was a one-time cost. The legislature had not earmarked funds for what the district claimed were the on going educational cost of providing additional resources for newly created high poverty schools. As a result, the district’s position was that these additional funds would have to be locally generated which translates into tax increases for Canton’s residents. It would appear then that tax increases would be the result of ensuring that students in high poverty schools had the necessary resources to succeed.

The loophole that this parent refers to is what the district ultimately presented as their argument to maintain the current student assignment plan. Canton presented research on the consequences of creating high poverty schools as evidence that returning to neighborhood schools would in fact create a hardship for the district as they attempted to adequately meet the needs of the children who would now be attending those schools. Additionally, there was a portion of the NSA that allowed for the presentation of an alternative plan if that plan would “better meet the goals of the NSA”. One should not be surprised to hear that the district argued that their current plan did just that.
This participant’s comments represent the feelings of all of the neighborhood school supporters who were interviewed. They clearly perceived the district as getting around the NSA and waging a campaign to get the community on their side. Moreover, neighborhood school supporters do not hesitate to claim that had the district not “interfered” in the process, neighborhood schools would have been a sure thing. Important to note is the fact that several participants singled out board president Mary Evans specifically as the ring leader of this challenge to neighborhood schools and one participant in particular implied that much of her resistance had more to do with her personal feelings about Ted Jones himself rather than what was best for the community.

_Laying the foundation_

Finally, examining community leaders’ feelings about the process that took place as Canton responded to the NSA is critical to our understanding of this story. Perhaps, the views of this particular group are even more important given their roles within the process itself. Their interviews differed from parents and even educators precisely because of where they were situated within the process that took place around the neighborhood schools debate. During their interviews, community leaders had far more to say about exactly how all of this came about than educators or parents. Although the themes follow those we’ve heard thus far, there appeared to be much more emphasis placed on the idea of leadership within this participant group than others.

One of the first things I heard from participants during these interviews was how much the district’s actions at the outset of this process impacted the final outcome. Given this sentiment, it made sense to go directly to the source to explore how they arrived at the decision to respond as they did. As we know, the school board developed a position paper
opposing the NSA even before it became law. As we discussed the board’s actions once the law was actually passed, Mrs. Evans, the board president offered the following comments,

One of the things we realized early on was that the concept of neighborhood schools just seemed like motherhood and apple pie to most people, it seems like a win-win for everyone. We knew that there was a lot of education that would need to occur for people to start digging into the real repercussion of going to neighborhood schools given the housing patterns in our community and that it was our responsibility and leadership to structure a process whereby that learning could occur.

So the school board’s initial reaction was to ask how they could engage the community in the process of examining the full impact of returning to neighborhood schools given that the idea is one that admittedly most Americans prefer. It becomes apparent then that they made the decision to advocate for a particular position on the neighborhood schools debate from the very start. Moreover, between the school board and school district, they were already in a position of leadership within the community, a position which no doubt made it easier to develop ways to engage the residents of Canton. As our conversation continued, Evans provides further insight into their thinking as she describes the particular strategy they developed in an effort to fully engage Canton residents. She noted this,

We also knew that we could structure things where we sent them out in written pieces, on television…wherever, but people needed a reason to listen to that. If they just thought that the board was going to make a decision they would say I’ll just wait for them to decide…they would not take the time to engage in the learning. We needed citizens in the community to own this decision…take it, have to go into the ballot box and decide well am I voting for my kid or am I voting for all kids. And
own that tension or that responsibility over personal interests versus greater good…and that if we announce a public vote, people would engage. We could produce a voter’s guide, we could do things that people would pay attention to and do a little bit of learning before they walked into the voting booth.

Their strategy was quite purposeful as they determined that providing information to the larger community outlining the academic and economic implications of neighborhood schools was the most effective way to challenge Canton residents to think about children other than their own. Setting up a public vote appeared to be the most effective way to empower residents to then act on those newly developed feelings.

As other community leaders who opposed the NSA were interviewed, we heard comments that were similar to those of parents and educators. Both Mr. Howard and Ms. Moore commented on the district’s strategy, noting that their leadership was crucial to the outcome of this process. Part of my conversation with Ms. Moore went this way,

I: Was there anything about their [the district’s] perspective that was unique or different around this?

S: I think that what they did was courageous because they were actually the district where the legislator who sponsored the law was living and he’s very intimidating so it took a lot of courage for that district to be focused on the righteousness and social justice, and not to be bullied into doing exactly what Ted Jones wanted to happen. Mary Evans was leading that effort.

Similarly, Mr. Howard responded positively about their efforts and noted this,

They have a rather innovative new superintendent and board president. There is an “Opt Out” in the NSA, which says that if you feel instituting the NSA would create
minority schools...or undue hardship and in essence create a school that would be questionable constitutionally, then that’s your Opt Out. And they really hung on that. Mr. Jones however did not view the district’s efforts in a similar light as he shared his thoughts on their role in this process. As we know, he perceived the district’s efforts as a campaign designed to skirt the NSA and maintain the status quo within the district. During the following conversation, Jones’ provides one reason he thinks such a campaign was launched,

S: There was tremendous opposition from...it lined up with parents vs. the school establishment. The school establishment was very much opposed to neighborhood schools.
I: In all four districts?
S: Oh yeah...you’ve got to realize they were 17 years under the court order. They hired people and had a lot of administrators whose focus is you know race and so you’ve got people whose jobs and careers directly relate to that...I think a lot of professional educators and people in educational management tend to fall on the liberal side of the spectrum where just philosophically having race as a factor in public policy is what that side considers a public good and a necessity.
I: So that’s what you’d expect to hear then from people given the climate right now?
S: Absolutely. So it was the school district management, the state school board, the department of education who fought this.

The question here is whether or not Jones’ assertions are correct. How much of the effort to maintain Canton’s current student assignment plan was motivated by self-interest rather than a genuine concern for students within this community? Based on interviews with building
administrators this was certainly not the case as they all had very strong beliefs about maintaining Canton’s current plan because it was the right and equitable thing to do to ensure that every student has the opportunity for academic success. In fact, recall that the only mention of job impacts during interviews with this group was about teachers needing to be reassigned, not about individuals losing jobs altogether. The Voter’s Guide for instance presented monetary figures related to the transfer of district personnel from one school to another with no mention of job loss on any level. A second aspect to explore is whether or not there was a loss of personnel in the two districts that have since returned to neighborhood schools. The Duncan School District’s neighborhood schools plan was approved in the spring of 2002, while Smithville’s plan was only recently approved in December of 2004 after two previous rejections. Phone calls to the Superintendent’s office of both districts confirmed what I suspected which was that there was no job loss in either district, simply reassignments. One staff member’s response was “well we have the same number of kids, so we certainly wouldn’t terminate administrators or teachers, but we did have to reorganize some of our personnel”. So it would seem that Jones’ argument doesn’t quite hold up given the evidence presented. Perhaps it should be viewed as simply his way of creating a campaign that countered what the school district was putting forth.

Of course Jones not only had an opinion about why the district was motivated to oppose the NSA, but had opinions regarding the process by which they went about doing so as well. Specifically discussing the public vote held in Canton for instance Jones argues that the district ultimately manipulated residents within the community. He notes,
Well you know they created their own election, they defined the time, they poured a lot of taxpayer resources into creating a straw man and knocking it down telling people how horrible this was and then said by the way go out and vote and tell us how you feel about it. I didn’t have that kind of money to sit out there and say you know this is the other side. And there was no group that was kind of behind the opposition for this and who had the funds to go out there and counter advertise and say ok, here are the facts…so it was really a manufactured plebiscite.

Clearly he perceives the process that took place within Canton and the board’s actions in particular as calculating at best. In his opinion, the district was determined to come up with ways not to follow the law as mandated.

At one point in our interview, Jones’ discussed what he viewed as the unreliability of the vote itself, noting that very few residents actually turned out for it. An examination of archived newspaper articles from the time this process was occurring provides data that is surely of interest here. First, it was noted that Jones commissioned a poll of Canton residents prior to the NSA’s passage to determine whether or not the community preferred neighborhood schools. While school district officials questioned the validity of that poll based on the wording of the question without additional information on the implications of such a plan, there is another aspect here which is all the more compelling given Jones’ criticism of the public vote. Only 623 residents were polled, of which 71% of them favored neighborhood schools (Sobek, 2000). Secondly, polling results show that almost 5600 residents voted in the plebiscite, “more than the 3300 that voted in the school board election in May but not as many as the nearly 10,000 people who turned out to approve a $95 million plan to renovate eight schools that same month” (Sobek, 2001, p. 12A). The obvious
question is whether Mr. Jones would consider the results of either his own poll or the school board election unreliable given the small number of residents involved in each.

These results also provide additional insight into Jones’ statements. Recall that district residents were asked two questions, 1) which of the three proposed neighborhood school plans they prefer and 2) would they prefer to keep the current plan over the neighborhood schools plan they chose in question one. On the second question, there were 3,834 votes in favor of the current plan vs. 1,762 votes in favor of the neighborhood schools plans. At none of the polling places did neighborhood schools win out over keeping the current plan. While Jones’ argues that few residents showed up to vote, it is difficult to ignore the fact that more residents voted on the neighborhood schools issue than in the last school board election. It is also hard to ignore the fact that of the 5600 residents that did show up, 1700 of them were neighborhood school supporters. Obviously there were some neighborhood school supporters who felt compelled to make their voices known. This seems to counter one of Jones’ arguments which was that only opponents of the NSA came out to vote. Had the vote been reversed, with the 3800 votes going to neighborhood schools for instance, would Jones have argued that there were too few voters present to deem the plebiscite reliable or would the argument have been that the majority of voters preferred neighborhood schools regardless of how many residents actually voted?

Given his responses during this portion of the interview, I also asked Mr. Jones how he viewed the state’s subsequent approval of Canton’s current plan as their neighborhood schools plan despite the NSA. He had this to say,

I: So then what was your perception when the state said ok, we’re going to accept the current plan?
S: Oh, it greatly annoyed me. I mean as a legislator, as a citizen. I think it’s not in keeping with the oath of the state school board members…they violated their constitutional responsibilities. I recognized that the law is not as strong as when originally drafted but the state board has decided not to [have them adhere to it] which is a great annoyance.

I: Is your thinking that this is it or is there still more work to be done then?

S: I think there is still more work to be done but I think that until parents organize and pick it up, it’s going slowly…Duncan did it and Smithville is getting there. I think there is a law on the books which means you can have another case if a citizen wanted to step forward and file a lawsuit saying Canton is not following the law…I think it depends on what action other citizens are willing to take.

I thought it was particularly interesting that he seems to be saying there is nothing else he can do as a legislator to ensure that Canton returns to neighborhood schools, but that there is certainly something other residents can do to move this forward if they chose to do so. The likelihood of that happening in the near future is fairly low as far as I can tell from any of the groups interviewed during this study. It appears that some new policy issue would have to propel such a move rather than residents simply deciding to try this again.

Finally, community leaders were asked whether they believed that a return to neighborhood schools was inevitable without the district’s leadership in this process. While we can be sure that Mr. Jones answered this question affirmatively, all three opponents of the NSA did as well. For instance, Linda Moore pointed to the fact that Mary Evans was a bright scholar who knew how to work her way around an issue. She notes, “had it not been for that kind of leadership I don’t think it would have gone the way it did in Canton”. She added two
caveats here however, namely that all four of the districts were working on this at the same time and that there was a tremendous amount of press coverage about the NSA as well. Both of which she says surely contributed to increasing the visibility of the neighborhood schools debate therefore making it difficult to not have a reaction to it one way or the other. But perhaps Mrs. Evans said it best when she answered the question this way,

I: Is your sense that this community may have had the exact same outcome had the board not taken the leadership that it did…would the NSA have gone right over people’s heads?

S: Yeah, it would have gone through.

I: The community may not have jumped on it?

S: They would not have seen a way to jump on it because the law was in place.

Her statement is a powerful one indeed and is one that we will explore a bit later as we examine the levels of activism visible within the community during this process.

Legislative Leadership

Just as it is evident that the school district played a crucial role in this process, the state legislator who sponsored the NSA was an equally significant actor in this story. In fact, without his initial leadership, we could argue that there would have been no process at all as Canton had no plans to change their current student assignment pattern until he authored the neighborhood schools law. Clearly then hearing what participants had to say about Ted Jones is an important component of the study as we seek to further our understanding of the process that took place here.
Politics as usual

White suburban opponents did not have very much to say about the leadership of the legislator who spearheaded the move to neighborhood schools within the Canton community. I would generally attribute this lack of conversation about Mr. Jones, however to the fact that this group was my first set of participant interviews and I didn’t begin asking people about him specifically until I realized how much Canton’s educators had to say about him. Perhaps, though the fact that most of these parents didn’t mention Mr. Jones during the interviews the way that educators or neighborhood school supporters did actually has some meaning. I did not get the sense that White suburban parents were unfamiliar with Jones because they were quite familiar with the NSA, rather that there was simply no need to mention him specifically during their interviews. One or two parents however did make some reference to this particular politician or others in general during their interviews. For instance, as she discussed how contentious the regular dinner meetings that Canton residents hold with local legislators became during the neighborhood schools debate, one parent made the following statement,

It became so divisive that at one point we almost lost the legislative dinners because all parents ever wanted to present was “no we don’t want the neighborhood schools law” and Ted Jones wasn’t going to listen anymore. And the other legislators were under all kinds of pressure from their party and whatever, that they just were caught…and it was getting more and more uncomfortable.

Her statement suggests what I heard from others throughout this study, which is the fact that Mr. Jones was indeed the leader of the neighborhood schools movement and that other legislators were persuaded to follow for political reasons to be sure.
Again, archived newspaper articles offer some insight here. Much of what was written in the local paper, a paper that is viewed by neighborhood school supporters as particularly biased toward busing, discussed the politics behind the law. Columnists regularly wrote about Jones’ ability to manipulate an entire legislature into voting for an unpopular law that did not affect the whole state, but that all of their constituents would have to pay for given the additional appropriations that the state would have to provide for each of the four districts returning to neighborhood schools. Five days after the public vote, one columnist opened his piece with the following statement “While lawmakers discussed the neighborhood schools law in the spring of 2000, most political observers agreed on one thing – voting against the idea in an election year would be political suicide” (Mascitti, 2001, p.1B). The article goes on to say that neighborhood schools “were as popular as Mom and apple pie” and notes that “in the end, 56 of our 61 representatives and senators voted for a compromised plan” (p. 1B). The idea that politicians voted for the NSA because they feared losing constituents at such a crucial time and that they failed to adequately consider the ramifications of such a law was widely promulgated within the Canton community. Although it is not clear to what extent NSA opponents fully believed the media’s version of why the law was actually passed, one would guess that this kind of press coverage would have some impact on residents’ views about the law and its sponsor regardless of whether it is an accurate portrayal of what took place or not.

The consequences of political disengagement

During interviews with Black parents it appeared that they did not have as much information about certain parts of this process as their White counterparts. For example, after asking about their specific knowledge of the NSA itself, it became clear that while they
had some general knowledge of the law, they were not as well informed about the development and implementation of it. As a result, I asked Black participants if they knew who Ted Jones was in order to determine exactly how much information they had. When asked, most of the participants either didn’t know the name at all or knew the name but did not know that he sponsored the NSA. At that point, I typically found myself providing information about who he was and what his role was in this process. Two particular participants however were fully aware of whom Mr. Jones was and they are not surprisingly older adults who have been involved with the school district itself – the one parent who is also a teacher in the district and the grandparent who unsuccessfully ran for the school board. Both of these parents responded that the neighborhood schools law was initiated by Mr. Jones’ and noted that they originally heard about it either from him or from district administrators.

The fact that with the exception of these two participants, Jones was someone these parents were clearly unfamiliar with suggests that he was not very well connected to the Black community either in the city or in the suburban areas. One might assume that given his belief in the benefits of neighborhood schools, namely increased parental involvement, he would have had more of a presence in the Black community as he campaigned to get the bill passed in the House and subsequently implemented within the community itself. From interviews with White neighborhood schools supporters we certainly know that he canvassed residents from his own suburban community to find out how much support he had for the law before and after it was drafted. Though one cannot say for sure based on the limited number of interviews conducted in this study, it does not appear that he was as engaged with Black parents, some of whom in fact supported neighborhood schools in the end.
The mirror has two faces

As educators discussed the idea of neighborhood schools, the politician who authored the NSA and his position within these debates was almost always mentioned. Interestingly enough, educators did not all have the same opinion of him in spite of the fact that all of them opposed his plan. Essentially, educators presented Mr. Jones in two very different ways in this story and my own interview with him did not actually lead to a final opinion one way or the other. For some, Jones was seen as someone who cared about children and about the Canton community but who was misguided in his attempts to provide educational opportunities for students in general. Speaking about the legislator and whether the idea of returning to neighborhood schools was connected to issues of race as some participants have suggested, one assistant principal had this to say,

He is a good person, he has a good heart and he’s well meaning…and in no way do I think that race is why he is promoting neighborhood schools. I have known him for a good number of years, it was about other things unless he has me totally fooled. His proposal, in his heart and in his mind is about sending kids to the school that is closest to home and that is why I can support the concept and his ideas, it’s just that with the Black community being so centralized in the city this issue becomes racially identifiable and that’s the problem with his proposal no matter how you slice it up. It becomes racially identifiable and that, he cannot overcome. [The community] said we love your idea Ted but give us the details and when he was forced to give the details, they said we love you but stop it. When the details were coming to light, that is not what they wanted and I guarantee he will still be voted in next time. They won’t hold it against him in any way.
A second educator who had very similar feelings about Jones added this, “in his heart, he is looking out for children, but he has a very different background and his perceptions are very different.” While both of these educators present the legislator as simply trying to do what’s best for students in Canton, they seem to suggest that he was not only incorrect in his notion of how to do so, but apparently also out of touch with the very residents he was fighting for.

Other participants had different feelings about Mr. Jones and offered opinions of him that were less favorable. Several educators perceived this politician as someone who is not truly concerned with the needs of every student, rather only with those he deems worthy enough to receive a high quality education - upper income, suburban White children. Appearing to be less certain of his “true” motives than other opponents, one educator had this to say as she shared her opinions of the politician,

He has always been trying to reverse desegregation from day one. He opposed it 20 years ago and he’ll oppose it until the day he dies. And once [desegregation] was passed, he decided to get around it…he just didn’t like it. Somehow they managed to get the NSA passed, a lot of people just don’t know what’s going on…they just don’t pay attention. He wanted this for Canton, so he pushed and pushed and I think it was funny that the people he supposedly was doing this for are the ones who did nothing…they didn’t change a thing. I don’t know if he is a bigot…it was a stupid thing to do. And he’ll still tell you that the people that he heard from wanted neighborhood schools…but where were they at?

Finally, some of the educators interviewed presented an alternative representation of leadership regarding this local politician if you will. Rather than presenting opinions about
this individual specifically, several participants discussed their feelings about how policy
makers in general make decisions that affect those they represent, often with very little
knowledge of what their constituents want or how things work in the “real world”. A
building administrator voiced this sentiment when asked what she heard from her colleagues
during the time the district was developing their response to the NSA,

S: Most people that I was around felt that you don’t change just to change and it
would have been change that was forced upon us, not a change because what we
were doing wasn’t working…that we didn’t have a good system in place.
I: I see…
S: We all felt like we had a good system, both the grade configurations and the city-
suburban assignments…it’s working. And nobody wanted to go through an upheaval
like that because somebody out there who knows nothing about what goes on in here
wanted it done.
I: Policy makers?
S: Yes…politicians…no clue of the education that goes on in these buildings.

So what we have is certainly not a clearly defined picture of how Canton educators
viewed the local legislator who championed the NSA, but a somewhat complex one that
makes this story that much more dynamic. It seems that while they overwhelmingly opposed
neighborhood schools because of the academic and economic implications of such a plan,
educators clearly do not all believe that Jones authored the law as a way to purposely
segregate Canton’s children as some would suggest.
On behalf of our leader

As anticipated, participants who supported neighborhood schools had a great deal of positive things to say about Ted Jones. Given that Mr. Jones referred this group of participants to me, it should come as no surprise that several participants mentioned him fairly early on in the conversation, most often as they discussed how they found out about the law. Jones is arguably viewed as the leader of the neighborhood schools movement within the state and participants in this group certainly confirm that. Half of the parents interviewed reported that they heard about the NSA directly from this legislator, some of whom note that they had discussions with him as he was actually in the process of drafting it. For instance, the following conversation took place during my second interview with a parent, who supported neighborhood schools,

I: Do you remember exactly how you heard about the law?

S: We have been friends with Ted Jones for a long time, we have known him for years. I remember because early on before it was introduced, before he did anything he talked to parents, so I was somebody he talked to earlier on when he was trying to decide whether this was going to be something people wanted or not.

I: So you probably heard about it far earlier than lots of other folks in the district?

S: Probably…

I: Right, as he was sort of figuring out what to write about it and how he wanted to write it up.

S: Yes, if he wanted to do it at all to see if this is something that people want was my understanding.
I: So he started to check it out and take the temperature of the community so to speak to see if this was something that even made sense.

Several other participants related similar stories as well. Hearing what parents had to say gives us some idea about what took place even before the NSA was passed. It seems that the legislator began this process by taking the pulse of Canton residents to determine whether or not neighborhood schools was in fact something that they wanted to see happen. Throughout interviews with both opponents and supporters, participants recalled that early on in this process Jones consistently reported that 80% of his constituents wanted to return to neighborhood schools. Opponents of the law said that his statement could not have been accurate given the outcome of the public vote. Supporters noted however, that everyone they spoke to wanted neighborhood schools and that those who opposed the NSA were essentially the only ones who participated in the vote. It is probably fair to say that the truth lies somewhere in between. I suspect for example that residents discussed the issue of neighborhood schools primarily within their own circle of friends and acquaintances, which would certainly account for the varying perceptions of what the community wanted. Could this have been the case with Mr. Jones as well as he surveyed residents prior to drafting the NSA? Additionally, it has been suggested that Mr. Jones may have reported the numbers he did because he only asked whether residents wanted neighborhood schools – a concept that most people agree with on its face. Opponents argue that Jones did not, however give the whole story as he was discussing the issue with residents because had he provided them with information about what many see as the devastating consequences of returning to neighborhood schools, he would certainly not have been able to claim that 80% of his constituents supported such a move.
In any case, this group of participants supported a return to neighborhood schools and they strongly supported the man they saw leading the way for that to happen. Jones clearly had a following and counted on these residents to back him up as he introduced the NSA to policy makers throughout the state. Despite their support however, we now know that much more was needed in order for neighborhood schools to be implemented within the Canton School District. The complexities of the process that ultimately took place in Canton provide evidence of this indeed.

**Black Leadership: Missing in Action**

Finally, the one question that arose as I began interviewing participants was one about leadership within the Black community specifically. Throughout this study, the school board president and the local legislator have clearly emerged as leaders on opposite sides of the neighborhood schools debate in Canton, but they are both White upper middle class suburban residents. Where was the voice from within the Black community, most of whom we know reside in the city? Who spoke for Black families in either community? Based on the responses of the participants I interviewed, the question was a good one indeed. Both city and suburban Black parents reported that there was no visible leader from within the Black community on the issue of neighborhood schools but their answers must be qualified. One of the first points that suburban parents made was that they are disconnected not only from Blacks in the city but from other Black families residing in their own neighborhood as well because they are so sparsely scattered within suburban communities. As a result, although they did not see a Black leader emerge during this process, they felt that it could have been more a function of this disconnection rather than the fact that there wasn’t one at all. This became particularly evident as I asked about Linda Moore, the Black woman who headed the
Springdale Neighborhood Schools Committee immediately after the law was initially passed in April 2000 and who testified at the school board meeting as one of the outside experts brought in to provide information on the implications of returning to neighborhood schools. She is also the head of a local community arts center and of one of the charter schools in the city. My own perception was that Ms. Moore might have taken on a leadership role within the neighborhood schools debate, but whether this was actually true remained to be seen as we will hear. When I asked how familiar he was with Ms. Moore, one parent had this to say,

I: Do you know the name Linda Moore?
S: Yes, I do know who she is.
I: Did you see her as a leader in the Black community…or did you see others?
S: We didn’t have any leaders…anyone that you could coin as a leader. The reason I know who you’re talking about is because one of my buddies has his daughter very involved in the arts, so that’s how we know about her center. But as far as naming someone I could tag as a leader, it didn’t happen…and it still isn’t.
I: I’m hearing that Ms. Moore was brought in to speak at a school board meeting so I wondered if she was identified as a leader.
S: Probably in the city she may have been…because out here there aren’t enough minorities. And the ones who are here haven’t built a network or anything…they may say hi or speak but no more than that. You could look around the rooms at meetings and see us scattered but not doing anything as a group.
I heard similar responses from other Black participants as well. In fact, some of those interviewed had never even heard Ms. Moore’s name prior to our interview.
I then began asking where Black churches were situated within this process, thinking that they may have had some influence here and heard something I found particularly interesting. This same parent shared this when asked if he heard anything from Black churches, “Not up here because there aren’t any, they’re all in the city. Now we still worship at our home church back where we moved from so we wouldn’t have heard much from the churches in Springdale”.

The suburban mother and grandmother added this during our discussion of leadership within the Black community,

I: Where was the Black leadership?
M: Hah!!!
I: Because what I’m hearing from all of this is that no matter which way you slice it, Black kids would have lost out more than anyone else, so…
G: I didn’t see any leadership.
M: You didn’t see it.
I: Does the name Linda Moore ring a bell?
G: No…

Both of these women were quite clear in their belief that there were no visible leaders from within the Black community during the time Canton responded to the NSA. When asked whether the Black churches were involved during this process, here was their response,

They probably were…but there are no Black churches in this area. They all would have probably been in the city of Springdale. We don’t worship up here, we go back to our home church so we don’t know. But you would think that if they had been you would have seen them out rallying everyone and you didn’t see that.
From what we hear in these participants’ words, it is no surprise then that Black suburban parents are disconnected from each other and from the city. We know that historically the Black church as been a central unit within Black communities, a place where residents often congregate to do more than worship. With no such centerpiece in suburban neighborhoods, combined with the fact that most Black families in this community do not actually come from Springdale, the lack of community cohesion among them is certainly understandable. Given these dynamics, one can easily see why they may not have been privy to the emergence of leaders within the Black community.

Unfortunately, that isn’t the end of the story. Black parents in the city did not report seeing anyone emerge as a leader during this effort either. One parent from the city shared this during our conversation,

I: Where do you see people like Linda Moore, does that name sound familiar?

S: Yeah…I didn’t even realize she lived in the district.

I: Actually, I’m not sure she does…I don’t remember now.

S: Yeah, she runs the cultural arts center. I think Ken Thomas was a real voice, maybe not in the Canton School District, but overall I think a lot of his philosophies carried over to the thinking of some of the Blacks in the district.

I: I have heard someone mention him from before all of this. So you would say he’s an older voice, not so much though when this all happened?

S: Right, he was a person I felt was more outspoken, that people listened to.

I: So his message may just have carried over. I brought up Ms. Moore because she was one of the people who spoke at the board and I thought she may have emerged as a leader, but I’m not really hearing that anyone did…not in the Black community.
S: No, I’m not certain that there was now that I think about it.

I: Because even though it sounds like she was around and vocal, it doesn’t sound like a lot of people actually knew her name.

S: That’s true. I know here because of her musical talents and all of that, because of the center and because her father was a good friend of mine…

I: And she co-chaired the SNSC…

S: Yeah…they may know her because of the center and they wanted a cross section of folks on that committee, but I’m not certain that she was ever really that outspoken in the community.

I: What about organizations like the Urban League?

S: I’m not certain they were a real voice.

I: Ok, now how about the Black churches, did they fit into all of this?

S: You know I go to a Catholic church, but I don’t recall them really saying a yes or no in this debate really. I’m not in touch with most others.

I: Is it a Black Catholic church?

S: Yes, predominately Black.

I: So wasn’t there a big outcry?

S: No, but a lot of our membership doesn’t live in Canton.

So there it is again, this level of disconnection that we’ve heard but now from a different location. This parent does reside in the city but attends a church where most of the parishioners do not so there would be no reason for them to discuss the neighborhood schools issue in Canton. I did find it interesting, however that even residing in the city and being more connected to school district issues than most, this participant echoes the response that
there was no visible leadership during this process within the Black community. Surely, we must note though that this was a very small sample of participants who were fairly difficult to locate in the end. If I were to continue this study, the next place to go would no doubt be to the Black churches in the city of Springdale to both recruit participants and interview church leaders to get their stories.

Nevertheless, we have listened as these participants shared what they experienced during the time the community responded to the NSA. As they have pointed out, no one seemed to emerge as a significant voice from within the Black community, which is not to say that there was no voice for the Black community. As we will learn a bit later in the chapter participants had some particular insights to share about who spoke for the children that had the most to lose and who ultimately prevented the return to neighborhood schools in the Canton community.

*Forming Alliances, Affecting Change*

Despite the lack of visible leadership within the Black community reported by the parents interviewed in the study, there appeared to be several individuals or organizations that were clearly active and speaking out for the Black community during this process. As we know, the Springdale Urban League was certainly involved in these efforts and at a more individual level certainly Linda Moore was identified as an advocate for maintaining Canton’s current plan. As we examine this process a bit more closely, one realizes that the Black leadership that was present was actually in the shape of coalitions formed between these actors and the Canton school board. Moreover, such alliances appear to have been taking place behind the scenes as community leaders were working to develop responses to
the NSA and therefore not likely to be observable to residents in any meaningful way, certainly explaining their perceptions about the lack of leadership within the community.

The school board understood that if they were to successfully prevent a return to neighborhood schools, they needed to develop alliances within Canton so that they could engage multiple communities. Given that the board president is a long time well known suburban resident, it was certainly easier to connect with suburban parents in general regardless of which side of the issue they actually supported. It would seem that making connections with Black residents from the city was critical because it was clear that those families would feel the greatest impact of a neighborhood schools law. Forming coalitions with advocates within this community would surely strengthen their case. As it turns out, Mrs. Evans had ties to this community and was viewed as an ally prior to the passage of the NSA. For instance Mr. Howard, the education director for the Springdale Urban League said the following,

    We were approached by Mrs. Evans and she’s also very closely aligned with us…she’s a member of my education committee, and she thinks the same way that I do. We’re very lucky that she is the board president because she’s very supportive of what we do and we in turn support her in many ways.

He goes on to discuss how their own organization viewed this process and added the following comments,

    This was a perfect opportunity for us to go out there and make ourselves known as far as a big policy issue because that’s what we do here…you know we don’t do anything else but that. It was almost like a meeting of the minds you know and a request on their part to say listen can you guys support us? We made a couple of
statements in front of the school board and in the paper saying that we were firmly in agreement with Canton and the school board.

So it would seem that the district, under Evans’ leadership, marshaled their allies down in the city and utilized the power so clearly generated by these types of alliances to defeat Mr. Jones’ efforts, thereby preventing a return to neighborhood schools. We already know that the district was perceived by many to favor maintaining the current student assignment plan. It becomes even clearer from all that we have heard that much of the credit for the success of doing so in the end can be attributed to the board president’s vision and leadership. Aligning the district with both local Black advocates and two groups of suburban parents in an effort to garner enough support for her plan indeed proved to be an enormously successful strategy.

Community Activism and Empowerment

Lastly, what emerged from these interviews as I explored how Canton’s residents became mobilized to challenge a mandate requiring a return to neighborhood schools was that they felt they had the power to do so. If as Zimmerman (2000) notes, community empowerment is the process of improving one’s community, of responding to threats to quality of life, and of fully involving citizens to accomplish such goals (p. 54), it is easy to see how residents became both interested enough to participate in these efforts and organized enough to be successful. It would appear that a primary source of empowerment in this instance actually comes from the type of leadership participants described above. One might suggest that the Canton School District’s initial decision to involve the community in the development of a response to the NSA set the stage for the level of empowerment that was all too visible within the community throughout this process.
Suburban Empowerment and Visibility

Particularly evident during the process was the level of activism visible among White suburban parents who opposed the NSA. By all accounts they were a force to be reckoned with. Fully comprehending this idea, one parent from this participant group discussed her reaction at the beginning of the process in the fall of 2001 and shared her thoughts from that time,

The school district is setting us up…giving us an opportunity to make our voices heard, they’re giving us a platform, let’s make sure we make the best use we can of that platform and so I was meaning to make people aware of what this was really going to mean – educating the public.

This parent understood the opportunity that was being provided by the district for community members to become involved in this process and organized a coalition whose mission was to find an alternative to a return to neighborhood schools despite the passage of the law. As she viewed it, educating the community and developing ways for individual and collective voices to be heard throughout this process were arguably their greatest accomplishments.

Given the demographics of the community within which this parent resides, I became curious about how many coalition members actually resided in other parts of the metropolitan Springdale area. She acknowledged that initially all members were White, middle class, suburban parents and went on to discuss their recognition of the need to include voices from other parts of the Canton community and their subsequent recruitment efforts as they became more organized as a group. She notes proudly that by the end of this process, the coalition consisted of a very diverse group of adults and students alike and describes the feeling of empowerment she and others felt as a result of the process as a whole,
It was such a neat feeling to have all different kinds of people, none of us knew each other, you know we all just had this common interest…and then to see the outcome of the vote going the way it did…we could feel like we really made a difference, it did something.

This participant went on to discuss the idea that as the coalition formed, they talked about being a group of people who did not know each other and who had different reasons for challenging a return to neighborhood schools. Indeed, such a circumstance may often be the case when opportunities for community empowerment arise as citizens mobilize around a given issue. Fishman, Salem, Chibnall, Legler, & Yapchai (1998) address this notion as they point out that “Although, within a given context, setting members may be working towards a common goal, these individuals have unique personal histories, assume different roles, and often represent different constituencies” (p. 509).

Although most of the parents interviewed were not as actively involved in the effort to maintain Canton’s current plan as the parent described above, they responded in ways that allow us to understand the level of empowerment they feel as a community nonetheless. One parent described this sense as she discusses whether or not she believes parents would have become mobilized to challenge a return to neighborhood schools without any external prompts, noting, “Oh, absolutely. A couple of years ago, and this is a tiny little thing, but they were dropping one of our phys. ed. classes…there was a gigantic response to that…so parents will certainly take on issues on their own”. Even the parent who supported the neighborhood school law acknowledged the level of empowerment parents in this community feel. Responding to the same question, she replied,
I think if people were ticked off enough, they probably would have fought it because they were angry enough a few years before to vote people off of the board...so I would think that at that time they were still vocal and ready to actually disagree…they’re saying hey, we feel that the education is important and we’re going to speak up.

Both of these parents relay the level of empowerment felt throughout this community as they describe past incidents and seem very clear that the issue of neighborhood schools was no different. As several participants see it, parents in Canton feel strongly about education and will readily challenge anything they deem to be unacceptable. As residents became more organized, turning up at public hearings, writing editorials in the local newspaper, and participating in informal discussions about neighborhood schools with friends, colleagues, and school personnel, one senses that they may have become more empowered as a community in general.

As Zimmerman (2000) points out, participation in these types of activities, the process of empowering, results in increased feelings of individual and collective empowerment overall. Moreover, individuals who participate in these activities are likely to experience this sense regardless of the actual outcome of their efforts. In this case, it seems that Canton residents were further rewarded for their participation by the end result – the approval of their current student assignment plan as their neighborhood school plan. As one parent already noted, the outcome of this process also served to further their sense of empowerment, the second element of Zimmerman’s discussion on the processes and outcomes of community empowerment. The fact that this was already an empowered group of parents with a history of voicing their opinions and challenging decisions they disagree
with, helps explain *how* they became mobilized within this process as well. Additionally, participating in the process to maintain their current student assignment plan served to further increase their sense of empowerment. Given this, it is difficult to imagine that these parents won’t become mobilized again around other educational issues and policies in the very near future. Based on other issues raised in these interviews, they are already gearing up for their next battle.

*Black Invisibility*

Examining the level of activism and empowerment experienced by White suburban parents who opposed the NSA is one thing, but it becomes necessary to explore how other groups fit within this process as well. Where do Canton’s Black residents or neighborhood school supporters say they were situated throughout this process for instance? Answering that question proved to be especially useful to understanding this community’s story. Although not particularly active during the process that took place as the community responded to the NSA, Black parents in this study did share their feelings about who they perceived to be the most active residents within the community. Moreover, their comments about the level of activism of various residents essentially echoed those of White parents who opposed the neighborhood schools law. While this group of parents tended to note that neighborhood schools would likely have been implemented within Canton had the district not provided the amount of information they did, they also pointed out that certain groups of parents also contributed to the final outcome of maintaining their current student assignment plan.

Without fail, Black participants reported that White suburban parents were far more active and empowered than Black parents during the time the community responded to the
NSA. During a discussion about the level of activism demonstrated by Canton’s Black residents, and specifically about who came to the public meetings, a suburban parent had this to say,

I: So who’s in the room when you go?

S: That’s what I was going to say…when we go, we are about 3 or 4%. And the shocking thing is that when we went down to the ones in the city, you saw the exact same thing as up here…just a small percentage of us.

I: Ok, so the argument that many of the Black parents in the city don’t attend meetings because they can’t get there doesn’t fly…

S: No it doesn’t…and they do send buses for people.

I: So you didn’t hear from a lot of Blacks at the public hearings then either?

S: Nope, there was like one Black family where we went…I went to one up here at the high school and it was like 90% White.

To be sure, other Black parents echoed this sentiment during their interviews as well. White suburban parents who opposed the NSA were also asked for their perceptions of the level of involvement in this effort on the part of Black parents within Springdale and consistently responded that Black parents were especially underrepresented at these meetings. Responding to whether or not she heard differences in opinions on the neighborhood school issue between groups of residents, one suburban White parent shared the following comments,

I: Could you hear any differences in what people were saying between Black and White families for example?

S: To be honest, I don’t have any African American friends that I talk to…


I: So it’s hard to hear if there were…

S: Exactly…I mean that’s just the way it is, so I didn’t have discussions. And a lot of the African American moms don’t come to the classrooms, so I chat with the moms that are there.

I: Which is part of what I’m hearing, that the voice of lower income Black parents from the city was missing.

S: I agree. I’m not sure how many showed up at the meeting.

I: So the story I’m starting to get is that the most vocal people were definitely wealthier White community members who came to those meetings and if I had walked in that door that’s who I would have seen?

S: Yeah.

I: So really you have a group of folks advocating for the whole district is how it sounds?

S: Oh yeah.

These responses raise a number of critical points about the racial and economic dynamics occurring within the Canton community. The first is the invisibility of Canton’s Black parents, the majority of which are lower middle to lower income residents who live in the city, when it comes to issues of public policy. Whether one is discussing their attendance at larger community meetings or within the classroom itself, they are typically not involved. During her interview, one of the Black parents shared her thinking about why this might be the case in general. She noted the following,

We don’t really participate as much as they [white parents] do. And one thing I find about a lot of Blacks and a lot of my friends…I know we are leading very busy lives,
there is a lot going on…working more than one job for example. There are a lot of stay at home moms in this [suburban] community.

The number of White women who are stay at home mothers was particularly evident during this study. With one exception, all of the White suburban mothers interviewed were at home and available for interviews during the day. In sharp contrast to this was the fact that when I began interviewing Black participants, none of them were available for interviews until after 6:00pm when they were home from work. Moreover, this was true for Black parents both in the city and the suburbs. This last participant also points out that many parents have to work more than one job, which clearly limits the amount of time available for parent meetings and other school activities. It would follow then that for Black parents, the only time to get other things done is after work. Add to that the additional responsibilities of making dinner, overseeing homework, and getting children to and from any extracurricular activities and one wonders whether attending meetings at school is a high priority or even a possibility. White families in this community on the other hand, are in a better position to have mothers who are not working or working part time which leaves several hours during the day to run errands, shop for groceries, and of course, volunteer at school. Perhaps it isn’t as simple as saying that Black parents just don’t show up then. For many their invisibility may be due to the inherent socioeconomic differences between these particular groups, differences which simply do not afford Black families in this community to have the same standards of living and subsequent opportunities for higher levels of involvement in public policy debates. The empowerment literature certainly confirms this when one examines what has been written about citizen participation and involvement in community activism (Duffy & Wong, 2000; Wandersman & Florin, 2000).
The second issue to address is the level of social segregation visible within Canton, which clearly exists despite the fact that the schools are very well integrated. As we heard, the White suburban parent noted that she didn’t hear from Black parents during this debate primarily because she doesn’t have Black friends. She was by no means the only White parent in this study who responded that way. Despite the fact that Canton is a very compact school district as we have heard, it seems that the multiple communities which exist within it continue to be isolated from one another in every area except for public schooling. We know from interviews with Black participants that Black and White families in Canton do not worship at the same churches for instance as the Black churches are all located downtown. White suburban parents certainly confirmed this during their own interviews. In instances where participants’ churches were mentioned, they reported that the congregations were overwhelmingly White and suburban. During other discussions, particularly those about community involvement, White participants for example often referred to the various swim clubs they belong to within their neighborhoods. On the other hand Black parents, even those few living in the suburban neighborhoods never mentioned any such clubs. I think it would be fair to say that the current levels of racial and economic segregation within this community play a major role in maintaining fairly high levels of social segregation as well.

As we explore the social segregation evident within Canton a bit more closely, Allport’s contact theory becomes quite useful. In their expansion of Allport’s original contact hypothesis, which outlined the primary conditions necessary to create successful intergroup interactions, Brewer and Gaertner (2001) offer that in order to achieve prejudice reduction and improved intergroup relationships, there are additional areas to examine as well. Their work addresses issues of generalization between groups of people and between
settings as one attempts to develop strategies designed to improve intergroup interactions. Specifically, do positive attitudes generated by successful sustained interracial contact between individuals transfer to whole groups and transfer between different situations? Using such a framework as a starting point may be one way to think about why despite positive interactions between Blacks and Whites at schools throughout Canton, there seems to be so little interaction between them in other settings. Given the small size of the Canton community and the resultant geographic proximity of these residents to one another, can we attribute some of the social distance between them to the unsuccessful transfer of positive attitudes from the schools to other aspects of their daily lives? What is it that keeps them from integrating their lives in other areas? While it may seem that the simple answer is socioeconomic status, we know that suburban Black families don’t appear to be completely connected to their White neighborhoods either. Recall for instance that of those interviewed, all of them continue to worship in their “home churches” rather than joining churches in the community where they actually live.

This is not to say that suburban Black families in Canton have no connections to their White neighbors. Interviews with this group would suggest the opposite actually as they discussed the warmth with which they have been received within these communities. But asking why there continues to be the appearance of “multiple communities” within Canton, and communities which are distinctly identifiable by race is a question worth examining given the importance that residents say they place on diversity. As opponents of the NSA in all participant groups (i.e. parents, educators) spoke, they often spoke of Canton as one community, united against neighborhood schools precisely because of the lack of diversity they claim it would create. Thus it is of particular interest to note that the idea of “one
community” seems in many ways only to apply to the school community. It certainly does not translate into one community if we take into account the fact that more than a few White parents can say they have no Black friends and Black families, particularly those in the city, are clearly not integrated into every aspect of the Canton community.

Finally, note what several Black parents said as they discussed the level of empowerment of White parents in this community during this process. The majority of participants actually attribute the success of maintaining Canton’s current student assignment plan directly to White parents’ high level of activism. During one interview, as we talked about whether there was a leader in the Black community, a suburban mother notes the following,

S: To me you didn’t need one because they were never going to let this happen, not in the Canton District. You had enough Whites and maybe a couple of Blacks saying they weren’t going to pass this…and your own board was not going to allow this to happen, they would have been run out…they were not going to do this.

I: So then it almost sounds like you’re saying that the reason it didn’t happen was because of the White community?

S: Right…

I: Not because of the Black community?

S: No.

I: So in the end, the White community had enough control…

S: That’s right.

Black participants clearly perceived the empowerment of the White suburban community as a significant factor in the final outcome within the Canton School District. The fact that
other groups of participants interviewed throughout the study corroborated the statements made by Black parents suggests that this is indeed the case.

Canton’s educators had similar perceptions of the levels of empowerment of various groups within the community during the time the district was responding to the NSA. Interestingly enough, discussions with this participant group about leadership inevitably seemed to lead to conversations about the levels of empowerment evident within Canton in general, and perhaps more significantly, among particular segments within the community itself. One educator had this to say in response to questions about community activism,

I: Some people say that even without the leadership of the district the community still might have challenged this…it may have taken longer, but these people are pretty active.
S: They certainly are…they are active. I think it would have gone over certain groups, certain populations. I think that there is a group that is very active though and knows what’s going on.
I: And can you identify who that group is…who they are likely to be?
S: Well, I think there is…I won’t say the whole city population, but I’ll say the lower income city population who tends not to pay attention to the local news and the law issues that are going on…I think it could have just gotten over their heads. There’s a certain minority population that does not know what’s going on, but I think the lower income population would have just said “oh, I’ve got to go here now…ok”.
I: So that it might have been pushed through if you didn’t have upper income residents paying attention and saying, no, no, no?
S: Right.
While not always stated so explicitly, when educators did voice the opinion that neighborhood schools would have been implemented with very little attention had it not been for the efforts of the district and the board, they tended to imply that the response to the law would have been different depending on which segment of the community one is examining. It becomes apparent that educators believed that lower income parents of color who reside in the city were the most likely group not to challenge the NSA while upper income, suburban, White and Black families were the groups most likely to question the implications of returning to neighborhood schools.

Like each group of participants, leaders from this community also had opinions on the level of activism on the part of Canton’s residents during the time they responded to the NSA. What was slightly different among this group’s comments however was the level of activism they noticed from Black residents in the city. Both Black and White educators and parents alike reported that the high level of involvement in this process on the part of White suburban residents was a significant factor in the prevention of a return to neighborhood schools, noting that Black parents in the city were for the most part invisible at public forums. Community leaders however, while acknowledging that White suburban parents provided the loudest voices of protest during this process have a slightly different perception of the role of Black parents, noting that they were not quite as silent as we have previously heard. Mr. Howard responded for example, that although minority parents were not as heavily involved in this process at the beginning, they began feeling more empowered and therefore became more involved as time went on. Mrs. Evans, sharing what she remembers about the visibility of Black parents during this time, offered the following comments,
I: Much of what I’ve heard is that Black parents from the city were not at those meetings.

S: Well we had a number of them show up at a hearing at Evergreen.

I: So being in their neighborhood does make some sense?

S: Right…and it’s community leaders of various positions and types and some parents and grandparents who responded and came to that meeting. But more than that it was more informal, it was taking the time to go to a church and talk to a couple of people and dig in through the neighborhood because a lot of them felt very uncomfortable coming to the hearings.

So Evans’ comments begin to shed some light on what we have heard about Black parents’ involvement during this process. It appears that the involvement of Black parents was less formal than that of White parents during this process and consisted of more personal interactions in locations where they felt most at ease. This would certainly account for the lack of visibility among this group at public hearings, and at the same time explain the ability of community leaders to know what Black parents were thinking during the time the community responded to the NSA. Simply put, it would seem that community leaders opposed to the NSA did in fact have their finger on the pulse of Black parents in Canton despite their “invisibility”.

The Silent Minority?

As we look more closely at the process that took place in the Canton community as they responded to the NSA, we begin to see where various “camps” were situated within it. Thus far, we know that many residents who were opposed to the neighborhood schools law were very outspoken in their opposition, taking every opportunity they had to make their
voices heard. As I conducted interviews with those residents, I had a clear picture of their high level of community involvement during this effort. By the time I began interviewing neighborhood school supporters, I was fairly certain that that their visibility at the public hearings and meetings held throughout this period was quite low, despite the more organized activity that took place as they worked to ensure the NSA’s passage initially. As I understand it, residents who supported neighborhood schools were actually more organized and vocal leading up to the time the NSA was authored and submitted to the legislature for a vote.

So, as one might expect one of the most critical questions for me during interviews with this group of parents was why they were not more vocal as the community responded to the NSA? Why were neighborhood school supporters so silent at the various public forums and why did there seem to be so little of their voice in this process? The answer to these questions was quite surprising and very closely connected to one of the themes presented earlier. Because these parents believed that neighborhood schools was imminent given the passage of a law mandating such a return, they simply didn’t think they needed to show up. As they presented in earlier comments, they assumed that the law would be followed precisely as it was laid out and therefore did not see the need to make their voices known.

Acting on this assumption, neighborhood school supporters did not organize themselves into coalitions for instance, and did not actively campaign to get their message out to the larger Canton community as their opponents did. During one of my earliest interviews with a neighborhood school supporter, following comment was made,

You know, I did not speak up…I trusted the law and it did not occur to me that this would happen. A law was passed which is great, we were all excited…all
the parents on the playground were supportive. It never occurred to me. Even people at my church who were on the committee and saying they were trying to keep the current plan...I was thinking they must be kind of wacko. It was a huge shock because the law has been passed...it's not a problem because this is the law. Why would we need to speak out, it was the law you know what I mean? It never occurred to me that this was going on.

Addressing what these parents now admit was their lower level of community involvement during this process, another parent had this to say,

S: That's the problem...we did not stand up for ourselves as we should have.

I: So I'm not missing anything, neighborhood schools supporters really didn’t show up?

S: No. We didn’t take the time to go to the meetings and we should have.

I: But some of what you said earlier makes sense to me...that you thought it was the law and therefore a done deal.

S: Sort of, yeah...we heard that the polls were overwhelmingly for neighborhood schools.

I: Well I think originally that’s what people were saying.

S: I mean it passed...it’s pretty much done right?

I: So that would account for why I am hearing that neighborhood school supporters just weren’t out there. People are saying well the residents who didn’t support the law were the ones who were at the hearings.
S: That is what I understand happened. Those who were very strongly against it…they took the time to get out there and have their voice heard. Most of us were not there and did not do anything…and that was our mistake.

Calling their inactivity during this process a mistake is a powerful statement indeed. This parent suggests that their lack of community involvement cost them in the end and resulted in the State Board of Education allowing the Canton School District to use their current student assignment plan as their neighborhood school plan.

As neighborhood school supporters discussed their level of activism as the community responded to the NSA, there was another factor that appears to have had an impact on why they were not more engaged throughout this process. The very fact that opponents were organized in a more formal manner and seemingly by a group who had legitimized authority (i.e. the school district), meant that some neighborhood school supporters may have felt defeated and therefore retreated early on in the process. Touching on this, one participant had this to say when asked if this was in fact the case, “I don’t think there were any organized groups out there calling for neighborhood schools, whereas I think the school board is an organization and I think they tend to…people think they speak with some authority”. Another parent noted, “I already felt defeated about it…I already know what these people are going to do, you could already see and feel the tone of what was going to happen”. She went on to say that this response was directly related to what she was hearing from the community in general, acknowledging that opponents were very outspoken about what they wanted to see happen. It seems that for some neighborhood school supporters then, going up against the school district and/or the larger community in general may have been viewed as unproductive and therefore not worth it in the long run.
Mr. Jones and I discussed why he thought those who supported neighborhood schools were not nearly as involved in this process as those who opposed them. His comments of course confirmed what supporters had to say about their level of involvement during my interviews with them. One of the first things he noted was that parents whose children were in the private school system did not have the motivation or the information to go out and vote. Although it might be easy to see why these parents did not have the motivation to vote, it does not seem likely that they didn’t have the information. According to an article written about the process that took place within Canton (Doorey & Harter, 2003) a Voter’s Guide was mailed to every resident in the district. Even if this somehow translated into public school residents only, it is unlikely that with so many of these 16 page documents disseminated throughout the community, that private school parents would not have had any access to them one way or another.

As our conversation continued Jones had additional thoughts on the issue,

I: I heard something interesting from one neighborhood school supporter I spoke with which was that she felt defeated before the outcome was even decided.

S: The district did a really good job and I know how politics is played….have your allies come and pack those meetings.

I: Which would explain why I’m not hearing that there were lots of supporters there.

S: You know the people who support neighborhood schools thought they had a law that said it was going to happen. I’m not sure how many of them were aware of all of this and the meetings were ostensibly about which plan they were going to choose. I think Canton did a little switcheroo by turning those meetings…really against the law. There was no organized group for neighborhood schools…there is no
group...just something informal, no coalition or anything. The Canton District had
the time and money and they really did a masterful job.

At this point, Jones’ comments need to be explored a bit more. Prior to the passage of the
NSA in the spring of 2000, neighborhood school supporters were fairly outspoken as they
sought to get the bill into the legislature for a vote. Recall that the courts ended
desegregation in Canton 1995, and other than some minor changes to their student
assignment patterns in 1997, there was no move to neighborhood schools. During that
period, supporters appeared to be more organized than they did after the law was passed.
Newspaper accounts of this process report that there was in fact an organized parent group in
a neighboring district for instance. While there wasn’t a similar group in Canton, it is not
quite clear why that was the case either before or after the NSA was passed. This is
particularly significant given that once the district began their campaign to inform residents
of the consequences of neighborhood schools, one would think that Jones himself would
have gathered together his supporters to at least present some sort of united public front. His
suggestion that the district had the time and money to roll out such an enormous campaign is
accurate, but not quite sufficient enough to explain why he didn’t do more to organize his
own constituents in whatever manner possible.

One particular statement he makes is perhaps the most compelling as Jones states that
he knows “how politics is played….have your allies come and pack those meetings”. It
seems quite odd that given what he knows, he would not then do precisely the same thing.
He further notes that he wasn’t sure whether supporters knew what was going on at the
meetings for example, which appears to be even more of a reason to make sure that they were
present. By his own admission, he knew what was going on within the district, so it is
strange indeed that Mr. Jones was not more proactive in his attempts to organize his supporters to counter much of what the district was doing at the time. Although he notes that NSA supporters assumed they had a law that would be adhered to; an assumption they confirmed during their own interviews, it is difficult to believe that given his position in the political process, he was as naïve as they were about the ability of an organized group of constituents to sway public policy. Given the lack of any other explanation here, however, one might be inclined to believe that this was precisely the case. Unfortunately, I didn’t ask whether or not he ever considered that the efforts of the district would actually pay off resulting in the approval of Canton’s current plan. We know that parents who supported neighborhood schools responded that it never occurred to them that Canton could maintain their current plan once the law was passed. Those interviews however took place months after my interview with Jones and I did not think to ask such a question prior to hearing these parents’ responses on the issue.

Finally, another parent raised an interesting point as she discussed why neighborhood school supporters were not as visible and organized around the issue. She was the only parent to address whether or not those in support of neighborhood schools were actually representative of the larger community. She noted, “I think that there was a perception that it was probably not marketed properly. Certain people supporting it were not necessarily the people that would have the broadest appeal”. Indeed we need to pause for a moment here and ask whom exactly supported neighborhood schools. Based on my interviews, there is actually no easy answer. If we were to examine just this group of parents for example, we would see a particular demographic – White, suburban, middle and upper income, two parent families under the age of 45. Could it be that this particular group and the legislator so
clearly identified with them are disconnected from other segments of the Canton community? How well can this group speak for Black parents either in the suburbs or in the city for instance? Do they have the same vision for public education that lower income Whites or anyone with older children might have? It is hard to know for sure, but perhaps this is a crucial piece of the puzzle. The difficulty here, however, is that this is the exact same demographic as my first set of interviews, and all but one of those parents adamantly opposed a return to neighborhood schools. One must conclude then that there are other differences between these two groups that we may or may not be privy to. Is it their political or religious affiliation for example? Or is it how long they have been in the Canton community that makes the difference? Given additional time and resources, this would surely be something to explore in more depth.

Throughout this chapter, readers have been given the opportunity to explore the process by which the Canton community became mobilized to prevent a return to neighborhood schools despite the passage of a law which mandated that they do so. Beginning with the leadership of a school board president, the community’s response to the NSA was a remarkable one indeed. Equally remarkable, however was how neighborhood school supporters may have contributed to this particular outcome as their level of activism clearly waned once the NSA was passed. Essentially, these two occurrences can be viewed as the foundation for what actually happened in Canton. In an effort to explore this process from a wider lens and more fully comprehend the dynamics of it however, let us revisit our discussion of social movements and connect what took place in this small community to more systemic sociological processes.
CHAPTER 9

Discussion

The emergent themes identified in this study allow us to analyze both the motivations and the process by which the Canton School District could successfully prevent a return to neighborhood schools despite a law requiring the community to do so. These themes also allowed us to generate and explore several new ideas about the processes involved in community mobilization and empowerment. To begin with, the current analysis provided a way to explore the idea that good community contact at one level (the passage of a law) does not mean that it will occur at another level (the implementation of that law). Secondly, we were able to examine the idea that a school district can successfully resist a policy they deem detrimental by 1) engaging a community’s sense of collective responsibility and 2) aligning themselves with those most likely to suffer if the policy is implemented. Closely tied to this is the idea that middle class, White suburban residents could be organized in a way in which they effectively provide a voice for lower income residents of color in a debate that historically places them on opposite sides of the fence. A fourth idea generated from this research is one that probes how a normally active group of residents could so easily underestimate the power of local activism to affect educational policy within their community. Finally, this study allows us to further reflect on the realities of race and class in the United States. Through this research we have been able to explore the idea that an integrated school community does not translate into integrated social communities (i.e.
churches, community organizations), despite the feeling of many within it that they are “an integrated community”.

The significance of the process the Canton community engaged in should not be lost on readers, particularly given the history of efforts to desegregate the nation’s public schools. Historically, suburban parents in particular have not supported efforts to integrate schools, especially if those efforts involved the creation of metropolitan desegregation plans despite evidence that such plans are the most effective way to achieve integration (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003). Yet in the current study, suburban parents were the group most actively involved in supporting efforts to maintain Canton’s current system of busing students between the city of Springdale and the surrounding suburbs. How is it then that this process occurred at this particular time and in this particular place? Furthermore, are there alternative explanations for what occurred in Canton other than those presented? Finally, what does this story have to offer to the larger educational policy arena? Throughout this chapter these questions will be considered as I summarize the process that took place within the Canton community, situating it within the empowerment and social movement literature. I will later explore the social and political implications of this analysis and discuss what I view as the limitations of the current study. Lastly, I will share my recommendations for future studies.

_Canton as a Reformative Social Movement_

The process that took place within the Canton community as they struggled to respond to the Neighborhood Schools Act is unique in the literature on desegregation. Beginning with the creation of a law which eliminated the use of race as a factor in student assignments, mandating instead that all students must attend the schools closest to their
homes and ending with a successful challenge to that law, Canton’s story is one well worth examining. This is particularly true given the direction that we are headed as school districts across the country are faced with similar circumstances. In this community, the strategies used to mobilize residents throughout Canton who opposed the neighborhood schools law outright and those who may have still been on the fence about it were clearly successful ones. Regardless of who was leading such an organized effort, we know that residents were being called to action to strongly oppose a return to neighborhood schools while those in favor of it were quietly assuming that such efforts were simply a waste of time. It was truly a social movement in the making.

*The Makings of a Movement*

What took place in Canton is clearly an example of today’s social movements as defined by current scholars (Binder, 2002; Burstein, 1999; Giugni, 1999; Mitra, 2005). Resistance to a change in educational policy within the community came not in the form of violent protests or strikes, but took the shape of persistent, focused discourse which led to the formation of strategic alliances, shifts in deeply held beliefs, and ultimately a public showing of support for maintaining Canton’s current system of busing. The process that occurred was in fact an illustration of discursive politics situated within the educational policy arena. Moreover, it offers an opportunity to explore current notions of social movement theory while contributing even further to the literature on the subject. Let us begin with a discussion of how Canton’s story specifically can be viewed through this lens.

As current theorists suggest, today’s social movements typically take place within institutions as opposed to the more traditional notion of social movements, which generally took place in the street. No longer are the primary social, economic, and political institutions
in this country immune to challenges concerning the equitable distribution of resources (Katzenstein, 1998). While the nation’s public schools have historically been the one place where such challenges have occurred, we know that the fight for equity decades earlier did not occur through community mobilization within school districts. What we see in Canton is the emergence of a social movement that took place within two institutions if you will – the public school system and the community it serves.

While some may argue that “community” should not be considered an institution, I would suggest that Americans have some fairly clear norms and expectations about how communities should function which are deeply ingrained and carried over from one generation to the next. Moore (1999) notes that “institutions are social groups that bound action by providing taken-for-granted prescriptions for what is a proper object of action (representational rules), for who can legitimately engage with that object (constitutive rules), and for what kinds of actions are appropriate and permissible vis-à-vis a particular subject of action (normative rules; Scott 1994:68). They are composed of organizations, networks, people, objects, money, and other resources” (p.99). She goes on to add that institutions “contain groups with vested interests in stability” (p.99). Communities certainly fit that notion and the mobilization of residents within them to resist educational policy is a clear example of a movement that occurred within two interconnected institutions.

We also know that as the location of social movements shifts to institutions, it becomes necessary to take a closer look at movement members. The idea that a movement consists of opposing groups, which have clearly defined boundaries creating an “us vs. them” scenario, is one that appears to be past its prime (Binder, 2002; Mitra, 2005). As noted, current social movements have challenged this concept as the line between insiders and
outsiders becomes more obscured, and the case in Canton presents a clear example of how blurred the lines between challengers and targeted institutions have truly become. In fact, one of the most intriguing aspects of Canton’s story is that by all accounts, efforts to prevent a return to neighborhood schools were initiated by the school board, skillfully led by the board president.

From the start this appears to be a classic case of insiders advocating for social change as the board sought to respond to a law they viewed as detrimental to the community in general and to students of color specifically. Recall that they openly expressed their opposition to the NSA even before it became law, first drafting a position paper and subsequently charging the neighborhood schools committee to specifically address issues of inequity as they attempted to develop the required plans. Mary Evans also reported that individual board members, some of who had been on the board during the development of the Post-Desegregation Reconfiguration Plan in 1997, were not in favor of revisiting that difficult process and returning to neighborhood schools. Clearly there was considerable resistance to this policy change from those within the institution itself – not typically the site of challenge initiatives in the more traditional view of social movement theory. This case is especially significant as we consider that several of the recent challenges to long-standing desegregation plans have been initiated by school districts that wish to end busing. While institutions of public education across the nation are seeking to return to neighborhood schools, here we have one that not only opposed such a move but also actually initiated the call to do so.

As we further examine what took place in Canton, and one institution’s role within that process, additional aspects of current social movements become evident as well.
Although the school board opposed a return to neighborhood schools, they understood that their opposition alone was not enough to secure the outcome they desired and set about implementing a strategy that they hoped would lead to the continuation of their current system of busing. It is here that we see the involvement of the second institution in this process – the Canton community, and how current social movement strategies (i.e. more verbal and cognitive mechanisms) bear out. Based on the data presented in this research we know that the board’s primary strategy was to develop ways for Canton residents to become engaged in the conversation and committed to the idea of providing equal educational opportunities for all of the district’s children, not simply their own. Creating a way for parents to affirm a new set of values was viewed as absolutely necessary if this community was to successfully prevent a return to neighborhood schools.

Without a doubt, the Canton community was engaged in discursive politics as they developed their response to the NSA. Throughout my interviews, participants easily described whom they spoke to about returning to neighborhood schools, how others responded to these discussions and most importantly, how beliefs about equity and responsibility came to be challenged within their community. Recall that discursive movements seek to bring about changes in deeply held beliefs as individuals “reinterpret, reformulate, rethink and rewrite the norms and practices of society and state” (Katzenstein, 1998, p. 17) which is precisely what took place in Canton. While we know that for a certain segment of the community, namely neighborhood school supporters, these discussions did not result in changes regarding their perception of the best way to provide equal educational opportunities in Canton, for many other residents this is exactly what occurred. Moreover, we know that these fundamental shifts, particularly on the part of White suburban parents,
were necessary in order to prevent a return to neighborhood schools. Once community leaders were able to create the conditions (awareness and engagement) which led to such concentrated discourse on the topic of neighborhood schools, they were able to secure enough public support, in the form of a public vote in this instance, to demonstrate to the State Board of Education that the community did not support a return to neighborhood schools. Without the use of traditional social movement strategies, namely protests, sit-ins, and strikes, Canton was able to resist changes to an educational policy that many residents and educators viewed as harmful to the most vulnerable members of their community, lower-income children of color.

Political Opportunities and Openings

Social movement scholars note that we must always examine the general context within which movements occur. In order to do so, let us first revisit the national scene with regard to current desegregation policies. As noted, efforts to roll back the clock on desegregation policies have succeeded at alarming rates beginning with earlier Supreme Court decisions, which granted several districts unitary status. Orfield and Eaton (1996) argue that these decisions are a direct result of the conservative make-up of the current Court, legacies of past conservative administrations. As the nation is once again in the midst of an extremely conservative presidential regime, school districts across the country continue to witness the end of desegregation efforts, as neighborhood schools are held up as the model in public education – a model that is likely to bring about increased levels of public school resegregation. In the Canton community, it was the Republican House Majority Leader who lobbied for the passage of the NSA; a move that certainly mirrors current national trends.
While communities all across the country are finding themselves in the middle of debates about whether or not maintaining racial and economic diversity within a district is a goal the nation should continue to aspire to, we have heard little to nothing about communities who successfully challenge returns to segregated neighborhood school systems. Therefore, the process that took place in Canton becomes that much more important to examine as current policy trends continue to threaten the legacy of Brown. Identifying the contexts within which this story took place is necessary if we are to understand the mechanisms through which this community was able to achieve a goal that appears to be so rarely achieved in the midst of local and national attempts to turn back the clock in public education.

Though recent social movement theorists have written about political opportunity structures within a movement (Binder, 2002; Moore, 1999), Tarrow’s (1998) use of the concept will be utilized for this particular discussion because of the comprehensive manner in which he outlines the various ways that social or political contexts affect the success of social movements and because I believe aspects of this particular case allow us to expand on each of the concepts he provides. Tarrow makes the case that those studying social movements need to explore the following areas which are viewed as openings for movements to occur: 1) how much access challengers have to political systems; 2) the instability of political alignments; 3) the possibility of elite alliances; and 4) cleavages among elites. Fortunately, the research in this study allows for the opportunity to examine what occurred in Canton using each of these components.

As this particular theory of social movement suggests, “movements emerge because the conditions for mobilization have expanded in the polity in general…” (Tarrow, 1998, p.
One of the primary areas to concern ourselves with is whether or not challengers have access to the systems that dictate how we are governed. Tarrow describes this access as primarily expressed through the election of government officials, but I would extend this idea to include mechanisms that also provide opportunities for the public to express opinions about social issues as well. In Canton, this access took the form of a public vote where residents were asked two questions: 1) which of the three proposed neighborhood school plans they favored, and 2) whether or not they would choose to keep the current student assignment plan over the neighborhood school plan they chose in question one. We know that of those that voted, nearly 70% did so in favor of maintaining their current plan. While this non-binding plebiscite was designed to gauge public opinion only, the results were significant enough for elected officials and the State Board to sit up and take notice. Moreover, a fundamental component of political opportunity structure is the extent to which opportunities to initiate change are perceived by challengers. In Canton, the engagement of residents by the school board and the subsequent public vote provided those opposed to neighborhood schools with a clear expectation that their voices would count. Simply put, the Canton community perceived opportunities to resist the implementation of a particular educational policy. Despite the fact that residents were aware that their actions might not result in a policy change, they mobilized to resist the NSA because the opportunities to do so were real. In the end, those opportunities ultimately led to significant social change.

The second area scholars need to explore, the instability of political alignments, was also evident during the process in Canton. Typically, shifts in political alignment refer to the electoral process and the arrival of new “opposition parties, which can create uncertainties among supporters” (p. 78). These shifts also tend to occur prior to the start of most social
movements. In Canton’s case, the instability occurred in the middle of the process itself and did so as a result of clear opposition to a specific policy, though not by a formal opposing political party. Nevertheless, they had a significant impact on the movement’s ultimate success. The NSA was initially passed because most state legislators were persuaded by the House Majority Leader that the communities involved wanted to return to neighborhood schools – a notion that we now understand was correct in theory only. Given this perception, voting in opposition to such a policy would have been considered a career ending decision to be sure.

Once the board and other community leaders tapped into residents’ collective sense of responsibility, however, there appeared to be dramatic shifts in political alignment. Immediately after the results of the public vote were revealed, several local legislators began acknowledging that they may have been too hasty in their decision to pass the NSA without fully considering the impact of a return to neighborhood schools, particularly for lower income students of color. Given the breadth and depth of public discourse that was taking place on the issue of neighborhood schools, combined with the results of the public vote, political alignments did indeed shift as politicians scrambled to rethink their decisions and respond to what much of the community was calling for – the continuation of busing. In the end, several of the legislators who originally voted to pass the NSA were actually discussing repeals or amendments to the law as a way out of the situation. Without a doubt, such political shifts had a tremendous impact on the final outcome of this particular movement.

The third component of political opportunity structure is one which has actually been partially addressed, but that warrants more attention at this point in the discussion. Opportunities for social movements to emerge and succeed depend in large part on whether
or not challengers have elite alliances. Moreover, we know that the lines between movement insiders and outsiders are no longer as distinct as they were once thought to be. We have already established that in this particular case, insiders (i.e. school board members) actually initiated efforts to prevent a return to neighborhood schools. We should however, consider the role of other community leaders in this effort as well. Despite the fact that participants were not able to identify visible Black leaders for example, it is not the case that there were no elite alliances involved in this process at all. What we actually learned is that there were at least two other individuals of color participating in the efforts to prevent a return to neighborhood schools who had access to the social, economical, and political power structures within the community – Linda Moore and Gary Howard. In her roles as the chair of the Springdale Neighborhood Schools committee and expert witness in school board proceedings, Moore was certainly in the position to provide information, influence policy, and assist the larger group of challengers (public school parents) in their efforts. Similarly, as the education director for the local civil rights organization, Howard’s position allowed for a significant amount of influence in this process as well. In fact, while it is difficult to determine whether we might consider these two individuals as insiders or outsiders given where they were situated; precisely the point in current notions of social movements of course, it is not difficult to concede that they should be considered elite alliances for challengers because of their access to institutional leaders and their ability to influence public policy.

Lastly, as we examine the various openings that allow for the emergence and success of social movements, we need to explore what Tarrow refers to as cleavages among elites. Normally, divisions within power structures have been identified by outside challengers and
signal a window of opportunity for protest to take place. Additionally, these cleavages are typically visible within a political party for instance. I would expand Tarrow’s contention and submit that such cleavages among elites do not necessarily have to occur within political parties, but can occur within other groups as well, which have an equally significant impact on the success or failure of a social movement. In the case of Canton, the schism actually occurred between White suburban parents, a population that is arguably considered to be the elites among residential populations.

Recall that there were two distinct groups of White suburban parents in this story, those who opposed neighborhood schools and those who supported them. What is unique here is that the cleavage between these groups of elites was widened as a result of concentrated efforts to do so in order to maintain the district’s current student assignment plan. Let us revisit for a moment an aspect of this discussion which several participants have noted - the idea that when the NSA was passed, many suburban families were actually advocating for neighborhood schools despite the fact that others say this is the very group that would have challenged it regardless of district leadership. Given these two very different views of suburban parents in Canton, how then did the community manage to maintain their current student assignment plan? While certainly a portion of the suburban population was opposed to neighborhood schools from the start and appears to have been the group most likely to challenge it regardless of the district’s involvement, an equally powerful but separate segment of suburban parents became empowered to challenge the NSA after receiving information which compelled them to do so. It would seem that once these two segments joined forces in their opposition to the NSA, those who continued to advocate for a return to neighborhood schools simply didn’t stand a chance. Moreover, the joining of these
two groups of suburban parents with advocates from the city who actively opposed the NSA appeared to have been effective enough to counteract the disempowerment of lower income minority families within the community.

This movement was meant to challenge residents’ ideas of equity and fairness in public schooling by forcing community elites to confront the realities of race and class in this country. As several neighborhood school supporters see it, challengers sought to exploit the situation to achieve the outcome they desired, a contention that may not be far from the truth depending on how one frames the events that took place within this community. What they seem to be referring to, however, is clearly the manipulation or management, if you will, of the existing cleavage between White suburban parents on the issue of neighborhood schools. During her interview, the school board president noted that they understood that many residents within the community needed to be engaged in this debate and needed to “own the tension” as it were. This suggests that the board had some comprehension that of the two segments within the White suburban community in particular they needed the larger of the two to be in support of maintaining the current system of busing if they were to accomplish their goal. In the end, the presence of a divided set of elites in this case proved to be an opening that allowed challengers not only to initiate a movement to resist neighborhood schools, but to succeed in their efforts as well.

As evidenced by the case in Canton, the various components of political opportunity structure offered by social movement theorists can be applied to localized movements, which do not specifically involve challenges to the state as previously conceived. Current movements, which are far more likely to be situated within institutions such as systems of public schooling and residential communities, should continue to be examined using this
framework. The current research contributes to our understanding of how these components can be applied to today’s movements by specifically identifying the ways that these particular aspects played out within a community attempting to resist neighborhood schools. Moreover, the current application of these concepts to a situation outside of traditional political and electoral structures actually expands the notions set forth by movement scholars.

Throughout this process, a large segment of the Canton community was ultimately attempting to resist a policy that would result in decreased levels of racial and economic diversity within their system of public education. Beginning with the presence of a few visionary leaders who went on to create strategic coalitions, which in the end allowed for the emergence of high levels of community empowerment and activism, what took place in this community is both fascinating and complex. Furthermore, examining this process in depth offered an opportunity to explore social movements in a slightly different way. Rather than viewing social movements only as large-scale processes that occur over very long periods of time, Canton’s story allows us to apply such a concept to smaller, more localized events, which are no less significant to communities as they continue to respond to current changes in educational policy and attempt to preserve the promise of Brown.

Notions of Empowerment

It is clear that what took place in Canton is an example of the type of social movements that are more typical in this day in age. While social movement theory helps us frame the larger macro-level processes that took place within this community, the empowerment literature helps us understand where specific individuals and groups were situated within the movement itself. Specifically, notions of empowerment help to explain who participated in this process and how the community was impacted as a result.
Perhaps the best place to begin is to explore how opponents and supporters of neighborhood schools viewed their own levels of empowerment as each side viewed theirs in a very different way. On the one hand, neighborhood school proponents felt empowered through the NSA itself as they held onto the belief that the law was all they needed to concern themselves with regardless of how strongly other residents opposed it. Their empowerment came from a legislative body with legitimate power to determine educational policy within the state. Given their assumptions and faith in such authority, one can see how they could be so easily blindsided when the request to maintain the current plan was actually granted. As a result, it appears that neighborhood school supporters failed to consider the influence that extremely empowered residents can have on the policy making process. This is of particular interest given that throughout the study I heard time and time again how well informed and empowered Canton residents are, waging battles that often result in changes when a policy is deemed unacceptable. One is left to wonder what was different in this case then, as neighborhood school supporters seemed to ignore the very activism that they are all too familiar with, and very often a part of.

On the other hand, opponents of the NSA were empowered by the school district and the board, organizations with the legitimate power to determine educational policy on some level as well. Where they differ, however, is that opponents seemed to have a better understanding of the power they possessed as residents and of how to utilize it in this instance. As we have heard, residents in this community have a long history of activism and will not hesitate to challenge a policy they consider detrimental to the community at large. As in the past, they firmly believed that high levels of community activism could result in actual changes in policy, which is precisely what happened. In the end, we can only
speculate about what the outcome might have been had neighborhood school supporters become as empowered as those opposed to the NSA and made their voices heard once the NSA was passed. We can say, however, that calling their inactivity a mistake in this instance, is an accurate call, as they must now live with the consequences of being the silent minority. Despite the inactivity on the part of neighborhood school supporters after the NSA was passed, we know that they are still considered to be active members of the Canton community. Certainly without their activism early on in the process, the NSA would not likely have been passed.

*The Challenges of Empowerment*

As we dig a bit deeper into Canton’s story, it also becomes necessary to explore how issues of race and class impacted notions of empowerment within this community. Returning to neighborhood schools would have been the most detrimental to Black residents, yet they were the least actively involved in ensuring that it didn’t happen. Participants have reported that not only did there appear to be no visible Black leader during this process, but that the Black community in general appeared to be invisible as well. If what participants in this study report is an accurate portrayal of what took place within this community as they responded to the NSA, then in many ways White suburban parents were the actual voice for both Black and White residents despite the fact that they had the least to lose. As interviews with those parents have demonstrated, they were particularly vocal about their reasons for not supporting the NSA. What would it have taken for Canton’s Black residents to feel as empowered as suburban White parents? The current study provides a clue of course about what it would have taken – most notably a highly visible Black leader with strong ties to both city and suburban parents. In the absence of such a figure, it seems that those who felt most
empowered and most able to affect some measure of change within this community, namely suburban White parents, were in the best possible position to provide this much needed voice in the end.

But is that all there is to the story? The more likely answer is that even the presence of a visible Black leader may not have been enough to ensure that Black residents in the city would have become more active in this process. The empowerment literature is filled with research on citizen participation as scholars attempt to explain why certain individuals are more active within their community than others. While some of this work focuses on the motives of participants in community activism (Oliver, 1984; Rich, 1980, as cited in Wandersman & Florin, 2000), most of the research focuses on the specific characteristics of individuals. Wandersman & Florin (2000), for example, present a framework of participation, which examines individual difference characteristics (demographic variables), and environmental characteristics (physical environment) in relation to organizational characteristics (type of participation), and how each of these areas shape participation. Clearly issues of race and class are important factors to explore in such a discussion. While one might guess that lower income residents are less likely to participate in community empowerment activities than middle-income residents given the increased focus on concrete daily needs or the belief that their voices are less likely to count, it is especially interesting to learn that some studies have found that once you control for SES, Blacks are actually more likely than Whites to participate in voluntary associations (Florin, Jones, & Wandersman, 1986; Orum, 1966; Williams, Babchuk, & Johnson, 1973 as cited in Wandersman & Florin, 2000). Just as academic achievement is more closely related to SES, so too is citizen participation.
The empowerment literature examines how communities become empowered in terms of both the process and the outcomes, and addresses community activism as it relates to participation. The current research allows us to expand on the literature by exploring the connection between the fundamental components of empowerment and citizen participation when a community is made up of multiple and visibly disengaged communities as is the case in Canton. How can an entire community become empowered when various groups of residents, disconnected in all other aspects of life, are only connected by their public schools? Moreover, despite accomplishing the task at hand, has a community truly become empowered if so many of its residents remain on the fringes and the chasm between these multiple worlds continues to exist?

The primary components of empowerment are active participation with others, developing ways to secure access to resources, and a basic understanding of one’s sociopolitical environment (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 43). Recalling what we’ve heard from both Black and White residents, we know that only certain groups of residents were actively participating with others during the time the community responded to the NSA. Despite attempts to engage lower income Black residents, they were simply not involved in this process in any organized way and certainly not in a position to access resources. It would seem reasonable to suggest that when there are disconnected communities, they are more likely to be collectively organized if there is a formal unit that connects them (i.e. the public school system). We know however that in Canton, the presence of a formal organizing agent was not sufficient to accomplish that task. Is it the case that when various groups within a community have such a history of disengagement, one instance of collective challenge would never be enough to change the structure and dynamics of the situation? Or
is it that the public school system, regardless of its history of integration is simply not the right vehicle for engagement? This is particularly compelling when we recall that one Black parent from the city spoke about not being treated well when she goes to her child’s school. It would be interesting to know whether Black residents would have become more active had the place of integration within the community been a faith based institution instead.

As we think about the last component necessary for empowerment - the idea that individuals have an understanding of their sociopolitical environment, it raises questions as well. Is it accurate to suggest that the difference between active and inactive residents in Canton is their level of understanding in this area? I would argue that both groups have some basic understanding of the particular social and political processes at work here, and that the difference is in their beliefs about their own ability to affect those processes. Again, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the level of disconnection between these multiple communities in every area except the schools, provides evidence of this. How often are the voices of lower income Black residents sought out for instance on issues not involving the schools? Given the social distance between these communities despite their physical proximity to one another, I would argue that the answer is fairly clear. Note that with the exception of one particular section of the city, these communities do not live together, worship together, play together, or work together.

Obviously there are challenges to ensuring community empowerment, which become even more difficult with the presence of multiple communities that are connected by one mechanism only. Even with effective leadership, the development of critical coalitions, and the engagement of one’s sense of morality, it still remains difficult to empower an entire community without engaging residents more systemically. Despite the success of Canton’s
efforts to affect educational policy, it doesn’t appear that this process changed the status quo within the community in any other meaningful way. I would offer that examining the process that took place here offers us a chance to think more specifically about how to link the process of empowerment and the outcome of it to produce true social change.

Even with the challenges presented here, there is no doubt that the process that occurred in Canton, which ultimately led to the continuation of their current student assignment plan, was a dynamic one. Situating parents, educators, and community leaders within that process allows us to fully understand exactly how this community was able to prevent a return to neighborhood schools despite a mandate which required them to do so. The how of this story is indeed what makes it so remarkable, given the current trend to return to neighborhood schools and the seemingly few community wide challenges to mandates that require them to do so.

*Implications of Analysis*

There are two primary areas to concern ourselves with as we explore the implications of this research. On the one hand, it is critical to examine the relevance of this study to the current policy environment as courts across the country continue to terminate public school desegregation plans. We must also consider the implications of this study on the social processes involved in efforts to maintain these types of plans, in light of the current trend to reverse them. In what ways can the events that took place within the Canton community inform either aspect of the desegregation debate? I would suggest that the current study has much to offer educators and policy makers alike as they continue to seek ways to effectively meet the educational needs of public school students throughout the United States.
Policy Implications

Given the recent trend to terminate court ordered desegregation plans, it is highly unusual for a school district to be granted permission to continue using a student assignment plan, which ensures that current levels of racial and economic diversity are maintained throughout the district. It is particularly interesting because this approval came after the passage of a neighborhood schools law within the county. Analyzing what occurred in Canton certainly allows us to situate this story within the current policy arena. Let us begin with the passage of the NSA, which clearly set the stage for subsequent events to occur. Remember that there was very little transition within the district after the 1995 court decision to end the county’s long-standing desegregation plan. It can be easily argued that the NSA was passed five years later specifically because of this level of inactivity on the part of the four districts involved, none of whom immediately returned to neighborhood schools after the desegregation order was lifted.

Within the NSA, there was a specific stipulation that race could no longer be used to assign students to schools within the four districts. As noted, Canton’s Post-Desegregation student assignment plan, and the few changes to feeder patterns implemented after that 1997 plan rely primarily on geographic distance and natural boundaries of neighborhoods, rather than race alone. In light of this stipulation, as Canton sought to respond to the requirements of the law, formal conversations within the community necessarily shifted away from race conscious strategies to a discourse about poverty. This exclusion left the district no choice but to present to the community and the State Board research around segregation by socioeconomic status (SES) instead.
In Canton, discussing the impact of creating high poverty schools became more of the focus, but it appears to be related to the fact that the NSA removed race from the equation. Here, the current policy context of desegregation helps frame the story even further. We know that there continues to be a great deal of debate about whether to continue efforts to desegregate our schools by race (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Wells, 1995). More recently, however, many of these conversations have focused on whether or not there is an alternative to assigning students to schools by race. It is this “alternative” that is the relevant component of this study. What was not mentioned in either the new law or Canton’s plan was the use of SES as a student assignment factor. While many believe that racial desegregation continues to have a place in American public education, there is a growing movement to rethink the factors that should be considered in the allocation of students to schools. The idea that we may need to shift our focus specifically from race to class has become a critical component in desegregation policy debates. Ultimately it became the lynchpin in the efforts to maintain the district’s current student assignment plan in Canton as well.

As Kahlenberg (2003) suggests, desegregating schools by SES rather than race is perhaps the most logical way to address the current inequities in the nation’s public schools. He points out, “When we think about why it is a disadvantage to attend a school segregated by race or class, it becomes clear that the primary issue is one of class” (p. 156). Specifically, socioeconomic integration is important because it improves academic achievement for low-income children and provides them with access to networks generally accessible only to middle class children. Both outcomes typically result in educational and occupational mobility for these students. Much of the research disseminated to the Canton
community was on the effects of creating high-poverty schools. Declaring that creating such schools would be a severe hardship to the community itself, the Canton School Board requested that their current student assignment plan (the Canton Plan) be used as their neighborhood schools plan. Taking this into account, it appears that the exclusion of race from the “formal dialogue” and the subsequent focus on class actually served to strengthen the case for those advocating maintaining the current plan because their claim that creating high poverty schools in the district would be detrimental to students is indeed accurate.

On the surface, one might argue that study participants fully understood the link between poverty and achievement as issues of resegregating lower income students continued to be the primary concern. It is not clear, however, whether or not the focus on class would have been as prominent had race not been removed from the conversation. For example, participants were not actually asked for their opinion on the integration of schools by SES rather than by race. Interestingly, when asked whether or not race was still the focus “off the record”, many of the participants responded that it most certainly was.

Given that many of Canton’s parents, educators, and community leaders actually supported maintaining their current student assignment pattern, the question raised here is whether socioeconomic class is now the more “correct” way to view this issue, and has therefore become more palatable even to those who might not have supported busing in the past? What has changed since the 1960s and 70s, when many residents, particularly White suburban parents, openly resisted attempts to integrate our public schools? Merely changing the words from race to class seems to be a bit too simple an explanation. In this community, however, it proved to be part of a successful strategy, albeit one most likely instigated by the requirements of the NSA itself. One wonders then whether state legislators who lobbied for
neighborhood schools actually sealed their own fate when they drafted the law and excluded race from the conversation entirely. This exclusion clearly opened the door for arguments against neighborhood schools based on socioeconomic status instead and the link between poverty and school achievement became a major factor in the decision-making process of the Canton community. Theoretically speaking, such a process positions this case squarely in the middle of current national desegregation debates.

*Social Implications*

As noted, there is a second aspect of this debate as school districts throughout the nation continue to witness the termination of court ordered desegregation plans. The social processes involved in Canton’s story are also important for communities facing similar situations and certainly need to be explored. First, we know that there is evidence to suggest that attitudes toward integrated schooling have indeed changed. As Orfield (2001) reported, most Americans believe that the nation’s public schools should be integrated despite the inherent contradiction of also wanting children to attend schools within their own neighborhood. For most of the parents interviewed in the current study, their response to the NSA would suggest that they have found a way to reconcile this dilemma as they demonstrate a strong commitment to principles of justice and equality. Regardless of which side of the debate participants in this study were on, they all agreed that having integrated neighborhood schools would be the ideal situation in Canton. Recognizing that such a circumstance would necessarily require integrated neighborhoods, several participants even suggested that the real issue here is one of segregated communities, pointing out that we must address this problem not at the school level, but more systemically as a nation. Despite the fact that neighborhood school supporters appeared to be more willing than opponents of the
law to sacrifice diversity within their schools, they nevertheless also seemed to be genuinely concerned about lower income students of color. Recall that a fundamental difference between supporters and opponents appeared to be in where they placed the responsibility for resolving the district’s inequities, not in their thinking about the consequences of creating high poverty schools within the district.

It would seem that in Canton, at least for opponents of the law, attitudes toward desegregation have changed and are indicative of attitudes throughout the nation as scholars continue to note. Over the last several decades, we have clearly witnessed a change in attitudes about desegregation in our public schools. As we consider the demographic of parents with school age children, one might anticipate such a response actually. When desegregation policies were introduced in this country, we were just beginning the civil rights movement. Many of today’s parents came of age either at the tail end of that movement or after many of the outcomes of it were firmly entrenched, and therefore have never experienced legal segregation for instance. While there were certainly parents who did admit that they had no friends of the opposite race, they are still more likely than not to believe that it is important for systems of public education to be fully integrated.

Secondly, we know that strategies designed to engage residents around this struggle were quite successful within Canton as many parents shifted their opinions on the issue of neighborhood schools. One can’t help but wonder whether similar levels of engagement would be as successful within other communities. Several of the recent desegregation reversals were actually initiated by parents whose children were denied access to particular schools because of race-based policies that were in place to maintain current levels of diversity. Would the outcomes have been the same had a similar process of “moral
engagement” taken place within those communities at the time? If there had been a Mary Evans for instance with the ability to align the school board with other like minded segments within the community, design strategies which tapped into residents’ consciousness, and then successfully mobilize them to action, would courts have been as likely to so easily dismantle desegregation practices? One might argue that a more organized and visible collective challenge may have changed the outcome in at least some of these instances. But it is also important to remember that the small size of Canton played a part in this story, as it is certainly easier to mobilize a fairly small community. Would such high levels of engagement even be possible in a district with 200,000 students as opposed to the 10,000 student school district of Canton? Theorizing aside, examining what it would take for other communities to experience similar outcomes would be well worth the effort.

Grounding this study within the social movement literature provides readers with a theoretically sound basis within which to examine it. The current research suggests that communities witnessing the termination of their court ordered desegregation plans should utilize strategies of collective action if they wish to mount successful challenges to such decisions. Doing so is perhaps the most effective way to engender wide spread community support and mobilize residents to take action against educational policies that are deemed harmful to a community. I would argue however, that social movements not only need to challenge policies which result in inequities within a system – the desired outcome of such movements, but that the very process that occurs in doing so needs to affect some measure of social change within the community. As the case of Canton illustrates, despite the success of the movement itself in preventing a return to neighborhood schools, the status quo as it relates to all other aspects of life in that community remain unchallenged and unchanged.
Multiple communities defined by race and class continue to exist and the voice of lower income Black parents continues to be largely absent from policy debates and the like.

Upon completing this study, my sense is that while current theorists continue to expand on the social movement literature, there is still a gap to be addressed, which this current research so clearly highlights. While scholars offer us new ways of thinking about social movements, they seem to lack any substantial discussion of how challengers might use the actual movement process to address the varying levels of empowerment within the movement itself – levels that do not necessarily change despite a movement’s ultimate success. The literature would benefit from further expansion, to include discussions of whether or not every voice needs to be equally empowered to achieve movement goals, and of the implications for social change should varying levels of empowerment between movement members persist.

Finally, as we consider this analysis, we must also ask whether there are alternative explanations for Canton’s final outcome. We know that the process that took place within the community centered around three primary components, namely, strong leadership, the development of key coalitions, and the strategic engagement of residents’ feelings about issues of equity and opportunity. Together, these components were utilized in a way that clearly propelled residents to act and ensured the continuation of Canton’s current student assignment plan. Given what participants have shared, most of which was confirmed by archived documented data and methods of triangulation, it is highly unlikely that there are other explanations for this story. Even if we take into account the perception of neighborhood schools supporters who argue that the district simply bamboozled the community into doing what they wanted and circumvented the law altogether, the primary
mechanisms used to do so remain the same -- leadership, coalitions, and engagement. It would seem that the final outcome in this community is in fact a result of precisely what has been presented here.

Lessons Learned

As plans that are designed to maintain racial diversity within school districts continue to be eliminated, as was most recently the case in both Seattle and Boston\(^7\) for example, we may very well see processes similar to the one that took place in Canton occurring in other communities across the country as residents and educators alike are forced to tackle the issue of returning to neighborhood schools. Surely Canton’s story would be important to those districts as they determine which components of it might mirror their own communities and could therefore serve as blueprints for the development of strategies of their own.

While there may be a number of conditions present within a community that facilitate the successful prevention of a return to neighborhood schools, they may not all have the same level of significance for those involved in a similar process. For policy makers who oppose neighborhood schools for instance, it would seem that one of the primary considerations might be to ensure that there is an “opt out” clause built into a policy that mandates a return to neighborhood schools. Similarly, for superintendents and community leaders looking to maintain student assignment plans that include busing, becoming especially familiar with such a mandate, and specifically with how the law is actually written, would be a critical step in the process. Exploring whether there are particular clauses that allow a district to opt out if need be, is clearly a useful strategy to employ in any effort to maintain racial and economic diversity.

\(^7\) In Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle School District No. 1 and Comfort vs. Lynn School Committee lower court decisions have been reversed, with circuit courts ruling that the voluntary plans utilized by these districts to ensure that schools are racially diverse violate the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause.
diversity within one’s community in light of a mandate to end busing. Superintendents should also consider the size and layout of a particular school district relative to other districts as they seek to develop strategies to prevent a return to neighborhood schools. Recall that the compact size of Canton figured prominently in their successful challenge, as residents believed that a return to neighborhood schools was not as necessary for them as it may have been for the surrounding districts. Noting that one size doesn’t fit all may be an effective argument in other communities as well.

Given what occurred in Canton, school district administrators would also be wise to identify the cleavages within various segments of the community and determine the best way to go about utilizing those divisions to their advantage. One of the most unique aspects of this story is that challengers were able to “split the vote”, if you will, convincing a large cadre of White suburban parents to oppose neighborhood schools. Finding ways to tap into a community’s sense of collective responsibility was certainly the way Canton’s leaders chose to manage and in fact further this divide, but there may be alternative ways to accomplish this.

Lastly, taking care to locate visible leaders within the Black community would likely lead to the increased presence of these voices within the process itself. Leaders that appeal to Black residents regardless of income would be the ideal advocates to engage as they must be able to sit on both sides of the fence, having a genuine appreciation for the issues that each group brings to the table. Utilizing the power of Black churches in such an effort appears to be a very good place to start in terms of organizing a substantial group of challengers from within the Black community in particular. I would venture to add that for communities with fairly significant Latino populations, a similar strategy should be employed as well.
Study Limitations

As with most research, there are bound to be additional factors to consider or changes to be made that would improve the study. This case study is certainly no different. Throughout the two years I conducted this research, there were several occasions where I found myself thinking about what could have been done differently. One of the greatest limitations of the study is the fact that I did not live closer to the community, which impacted several different aspects. Given that I live four hours away from the Canton community and was working part time, it was difficult to schedule trips that lasted more than a few days at a time and that could occur several times a month.  

One of the most significant ways this distance affected the study was in the limited number of participants interviewed. Having more access to the community would have afforded me the opportunity to spend more time implementing strategies to recruit participants. Not only did this impact the actual number of participants I was able to interview, it impacted which specific participants were interviewed as well. For example, I would have preferred to recruit more Black residents from the city to hear their thoughts about neighborhood schools and determine their level of involvement in this process. Since they were a particularly difficult group to recruit, longer periods of time spent in the community would likely have yielded better recruitment results. Additionally, there were individuals that were mentioned (i.e. community activists) during interviews as people that I should speak with, which simply didn’t seem possible given the time and travel constraints I was under.

Secondly, many of the interviews were scheduled during the winter months when weather related cancellations were obviously a concern. Because of the travel distance,
cancelled interviews could not be rescheduled as quickly as I would have liked and usually ended up being rescheduled a month or more later. Even when I was actually in the district during the winter months, there were several snowstorms, which closed down the city, resulting in cancellations as well. Surely, such circumstances limited my ability to recruit and interview more participants in general.

Finally, recruiting educators became a bit difficult to do, so interviews were not conducted until the last few days of the academic year. As a result, I was not able to recruit as many educators as I would have liked. It should be noted again that I was also not granted permission to enter the schools to recruit school district personnel until several months into data collection. Most significantly, however, I did not interview the superintendent of the district himself because he refused to participate as a result of a mistake on my part during the proposal phase of the study. Upon reading my proposal, he discovered that I was labeling Canton’s current plan a desegregation plan, which was incorrect given that the court terminated that plan in 1995. I immediately corrected the language in my proposal and was later required to meet with the attorney to ensure that I had my “facts right” before being granted permission to enter the schools. It was indeed a valuable learning experience for me.

A final limitation of the study is that I was not able to observe the process as it was taking place, given that I didn’t learn about the district until well after this process was over. I therefore had to rely on participant interviews and documented material to present Canton’s story. Based on the results, however, I believe that the study is a sound one even without observations of the process that took place as the community sought to respond to the NSA. I would add simply that having the ability to observe the process first hand would surely lend another dynamic to this story. This is a particularly important component as I consider the
responses I received from the member checks when participants were asked to read specific sections of this analysis to ensure that I captured the essence of what they experienced. While in general participants indicated that my research correctly captured what residents were experiencing during the time the community responded to the NSA, one response stands out from a neighborhood school supporter who disagreed with several of my interpretations. She took particular issue with my statements regarding their view of the NSA for instance, and insists that they didn’t support neighborhood schools “because it was the law” as I have suggested. She offered that they had valid reasons for supporting it and that their primary concern regarding the law was with the way the district sought to get around it. I can’t help but wonder how I would have interpreted their responses had I actually been in the community during the time they were responding to the law. Despite these limitations, I do believe that this case study is of some value to any community that finds themselves in a similar position, and to students and scholars alike who may be exploring ways that small-scale social movements can be utilized to either create or resist changes in educational policy.

Recommendations for Future Studies

In many ways, the limitations I outline above address the recommendations that I would make to anyone choosing to conduct a study similar to this one in the future. I would add several other recommendations, however. If this study were being replicated, we would assume that the community successfully prevented the implementation of a social or educational policy they viewed as detrimental to their community. In relation to specific components of study design, my first recommendation would be to spend more time locating the local churches within a given community to interview church leaders and recruit
participants. This would be especially important in Black communities given the role of the church there. Determining where the churches are situated within such a process would certainly add to the depth of study results. Secondly, I would suggest interviewing one or two additional local politicians, ensuring that there were interviews with politicians from both sides of the issue under debate. Doing so would likely result in the presentation of a much more holistic picture of the political climate surrounding the process, including why various politicians vote the way they do. In future studies, I would also suggest including student voices as well or perhaps only using students as participants. Although students were initially included in the current study, because of the limitations described above, I soon made the decision to eliminate them as participants. Hearing from those most affected by educational policies, however, would surely add to this type of analysis.

In relation to other studies, I would suggest several areas to examine based on the analysis presented in this research. Additional research conducted on the connections between leadership and particular communities engaged in the political processes surrounding educational policy would be useful as leaders seek to promote or resist changes in policy. How do leaders, for instance, make decisions about which groups to engage, and when that level of engagement should occur? Also, exploring when and how to use community engagement around a particular educational issue as a tool for larger social change would be helpful as we think about additional ways to ensure that all members of a community experience some level of empowerment. Studying how the process of social movements impacts real and perceived levels of empowerment among movement members using current social movement frameworks would be especially useful for theoretical advancement.
Based on the current research, I would also recommend conducting a similar study within communities that have not challenged mandates to return to neighborhood schools in an effort to determine what conditions are present that result in the acceptance of such policies. Conducting a study on communities that have returned to neighborhood schools should provide valuable information to those concerned with current desegregation policy trends and with how communities are responding to them.

Results from this study suggest that the development of a sense of collective responsibility and empowerment within a community, combined with the presentation of an alternative way to think about desegregation (i.e. SES) might be a viable approach to maintaining racial and economic diversity within a school district. This combination proved to be necessary in order to engender widespread support from the multiple communities within Canton, and particularly from the population most historically opposed to busing – White suburban middle class parents. Moreover, utilizing strategies identified within current theories of social movements at the local level appears to be an effective way to mobilize communities to resist educational policies that are viewed as detrimental to their most vulnerable students.

The Canton story is a dynamic example of what can be achieved through the use of small-scale social movements and one that allowed us to uncover new ideas in the process. The idea that good community contact and mobilization at one level (passage of the NSA) does not mean that it will occur at another (implementation of the NSA) is surely one of interest. Recognizing that an integrated school community does not automatically translate into integrated physical communities in other aspects of life (i.e. places of worship, social group memberships) is critical if we are to successfully create and promote positive
intergroup relations in the years to come. And lastly, creating ways to engage White suburban residents as new allies in efforts to prevent the resegregation of our nation’s public schools is perhaps one of the most fundamental tasks for educators and policy makers alike in the 21st century. Examining each of these elements as they took shape in the Canton School District is indeed a good place to begin as we continue to search for ways to preserve the promise of Brown.
REFERENCES


Canton Timeline

1995

US District Court declares school districts in the county to be unitary

January – March 1997

School Board meetings and public hearings held to discuss Reconfiguration Plans

March 24, 1997

Post Desegregation Reconfiguration: Board realigned K-3 feeders and 4-6 attendance zones
*1 school has closed & 1 school has opened since then*

APPENDIX B

NSA = Neighborhood Schools Act
SNSC = Springdale Neighborhood Schools Committee
GA = State General Assembly
NSC = Canton Neighborhood Schools Committee
Vita

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2005  The Pennsylvania State University  State College, PA

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