

## **Metco: A bit of history and a comment from someone who was there...**

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The Metco program began in 1966 with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation and the US Department of Education. Its primary objective was to help desegregate the heavily segregated Boston Public Schools since the prevailing view held that poor, black, children performed better when they attended integrated schools. The research at the time also supported this position. This was before the Black Power movement had begun, and much of the black community was still optimistic about the promise of integration.

In 1966 I was at Northeastern University supervising a Ford Foundation Grant program that placed "Ford Interns", NU undergraduates, in Boston Public high schools to teach Reading to classes of 15 students. We later added several Junior High Schools, (grades 7, 8, 9) to the program. In the summer, we ran a program for our Scholarship students who were black, at-risk youngsters who had graduated from Boston schools who, we believed, had the potential to do well if given the opportunity. They took a course in Reading /Writing Skills, as well as a college level course to prepare for the work they would be expected to do in the fall as NU freshmen.

The kids in the Ford Intern schools-- initially Burke HS, Jamaica Plain HS, and Girls HS-- were predominantly black. Their teachers, who were predominantly white, had little confidence in their ability to learn, never mind do well academically. I heard the "n" word more times than I could believe in the various Teacher's Rooms where I waited for a class to begin, or met with my students. This was the environment these children experienced every day. Perhaps some of you have heard of or read Jonathan Kozol's book [Death at an Early Age](#). It was one of the first of what became a genre, written by a dedicated teacher, to describe the children and the deadening effects of attending a Boston Public School at that time. In addition, most of the youngsters were poor with the attendant problems of poverty.

At about that time I became an Assistant Professor at NU and the Director of Tutor Training for United South End Settlements. I worked out of 48 Rutland Street where Mel King was the Director and I trained (and then supervised) a wide variety of people including Neighborhood Youth Corps kids, who comprised the backbone of our program, priests and nuns, Welfare mothers, and volunteers of every stripe. I taught them to assess and teach reading using an experiential approach, to early elementary school children. We began with one third- grade class at the Hurley School close to the settlement house, and later expanded the program to another two settlement houses, working with kids from grades 3 through 5. A year or so later, I did some training for South End Neighborhood Action Program (SNAP) as well. Again, our children were predominantly black and poor. In addition to the tutor training, I helped run support groups for parents and taught workshops for them when they asked what they could do to prepare their preschool children for Kindergarten or first grade. These were economically poor people, many with little education themselves, who were constantly struggling to protect their kids from the lure of the streets. But they knew the value of a good education and they wanted that for their children.

There was a great deal of excitement when Metco was first funded and implementation began. Two hundred Boston school children participated, going to 7 school systems that opened their doors to them. There was a fair amount of anxiety too on the part of these Metco parents, who were understandably concerned about how their children would be received in what were virtually all white schools. The parents I knew were much less interested in the fact that their kid would be sitting next to a white child, and much more interested in assuring their child a quality education. That, in fact, was term that was used—a quality education! From the comments I've seen on this blog, folks seem to believe that the black families who participated, wanted nothing more than for their children to be with white folks. Not true at all. Certainly not as a primary objective. The primary objective was to get their kids a quality education—pretty much unavailable in the Boston Public Schools-- so they could go on to college, get a good job, and secure a piece of the American pie. Metco parents are a self-selecting group, which is to say, because they choose to

participate in the program they embody certain characteristics. Ted mentioned some of the expectations parents had to meet, which included years of waking at 4 am to get their children up, dressed, fed, and on the bus at 5.

There was some commentary about the fact that the Metco students tended to stick together, to sit together in the cafeteria at lunch and so on, the suggestion being that “they” didn’t want to integrate anyway. Frankly, if I were one of 10 or 15 white students in a school of 500 or more black students, I would probably want to stick with my own group too! That uneasiness speaks volumes about the nature and status of race relations in this country. We have made great progress on many fronts, but scratch below the surface and you’ll discover that we are still a racist society; one that is not anywhere near finished dealing with its institutionalized racism.

Greer—Metco families are typically low-income families. I guarantee you that if they could afford to move to a welcoming suburb they would! If they could afford to move out of Boston, many would. And if there were safe, excellent public schools in Boston, I would guess that many would choose to stay. There is a great sense of neighborhood and community in Boston as you may or may not know! The simple fact is that they cannot. I find it beyond comprehension that you can accuse people who are only seeking educational opportunity for their children, of taking financial advantage of something or other—you’re not very clear about what they are supposedly taking advantage of! Knowing that you value education, I would be willing to bet that in the same circumstance you would do for your children precisely what the Metco parents have done, and continue to do, for theirs! .