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Dana Banks
Trinity College

Jack Dougherty
Trinity College

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City-Suburban Desegregation and Forced Choices: A Review Essay of Susan Eaton's *The Other Boston Busing Story*

reviewed by Dana Banks & Jack Dougherty – 2004

Title: City-Suburban Desegregation and Forced Choices: A Review Essay of Susan Eaton's *The Other Boston Busing Story*

Author(s): Susan E. Eaton

Publisher: Yale University Press, New Haven

ISBN: 0300087659, **Pages:** 293, **Year:** 2001

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Mention "Boston" and "busing" in the same title, and most readers conjure up images of the city's intense racial violence in 1975 over mandatory school desegregation (Formisano, 1991). But author Susan Eaton tells the "other" Boston busing story, a lesser-known and more hopeful tale about African American city students who voluntarily desegregated predominantly white suburban schools throughout the greater Boston area.

Beginning in 1966, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (commonly known as METCO) formed when black parents and activists sought what they envisioned as a "temporary remedy" for educational inequality in Boston's predominantly black schools (p. 3). Drawing political momentum from the Massachusetts 1965 Racial Imbalance Law, as well as the state's financial incentives for suburban schools to participate, the first cohort of 220 black city students volunteered to be bused into seven outlying white communities. Thirty-five years later, METCO had expanded to over 3,000 city students enrolled in over 30 suburban school districts, becoming the longest-running program of its kind in the nation (p. 5). Compared to the widely perceived failure of Boston's mandatory desegregation, METCO offered a longer-term, quieter, more peaceful resolution to racial segregation between city and suburbs, though not without personal costs to many of its voluntary participants.

In her book, Eaton's greatest strength is her keen ability to listen to METCO alumni and transport the reader vicariously into their worlds, to hear them express their joys, disappointments, and daily experiences with suburban integration in their own words. The alumni's stories at the heart of this book, combined with the author's chapter-by-chapter analyses, expand our understanding of the long-term outcomes of school desegregation as well as African-American racial identity development in predominantly white settings. But when it comes to drawing policy recommendations, these nuances are lost. Eaton's research is shaped by her need to make the strongest political arguments in support of the embattled METCO program. When summarizing individuals' stories to construct the book's broader claims, she overstates the evidence behind her argument that "nearly all" METCO alumni would repeat the program and downplays the level of ambivalence in the majority of their responses. After reviewing Eaton's study, we introduce our own findings from a parallel study of Project Concern, METCO's sister program in Hartford, Connecticut, which many alumni perceived as representing a "forced choice," due to lack of quality schools in the city and obstacles to securing housing in the suburbs. Participants' historical reflections on both of these voluntary city-to-suburb desegregation programs have profound implications for contemporary debates over race and educational policy.

Retelling the "other" Boston busing story

Eaton's study rests on the in-depth interviews she conducted with sixty-five former METCO students and the conclusions she draws from analyzing their thematic content and narrative structure. Her interview questions probe three areas: how alumni expressed memories of their experiences after so many years, their perceptions of the long-term costs and benefits, and their willingness to repeat the experience (p. 18). Eaton acknowledges that, due to the lack of an official roster of participants over the past three decades, her study is not a random sample of METCO alumni. Instead, Eaton made an appropriate decision to construct systematically a "chain-referral" sample, obtaining names through various sources, then asking these individuals to refer her to others. From a total pool of 189 prospective interview candidates, she selected those who helped her balance the final sample of 65, so that their gender, age-cohort, and the socioeconomic status of their suburban schools would resemble past surveys of METCO students (pp. 22, 264-8).

Previous social science surveys of METCO-style programs have found that black participants were more likely to report having racially-mixed social networks, career opportunities, and higher college graduation rates than their segregated counterparts (Crain, Miller, Hawes, and Peichert, 1992). While Eaton's research clearly draws from this body of literature, she distinguishes her work from it, carefully noting that she does not attempt to compare METCO alumni's long-term outcomes to those of their black peers in city schools. Instead, the author argues that her open-ended qualitative interview methods extend our depth of understanding of the "human processes" of black participation in city-suburban desegregation programs and the "meanings people attach to their own experiences" (pp. 17-18). In doing so, the book picks up on several themes raised in previous city-suburb desegregation studies (Wells and Crain, 1997) and fleshes them out in the rich detail that they deserve.

Eaton successfully captures compelling, deeply humanizing elements of her METCO alumni's stories, leading to some finely nuanced discussions of African American participation in predominantly white school desegregation programs. For example, we learn in "Why They Went" (chapter 2) that many working-class METCO families were motivated by an intense, though largely unconfirmed, vision of "a better education" in the wealthier and whiter suburban schools, where most students went on to college (pp. 27-31). Their watchword was opportunity, not necessarily racial diversity, the goal more commonly articulated by white advocates of racial integration. Despite the very long bus rides and the distance between their home and school communities, most METCO alumni continued to see their Boston neighborhoods as their true homes. As adults, two-thirds of the sample resided in the city rather than its suburbs. Accordingly, most framed their family's decision to participate in METCO as an effort to embrace the American dream, rather than a separation from Boston. "METCO is not a rejection of anything, really," asserted one alumna. "It is the choice of participation in something that maybe wasn't all set up right just for you, maybe they've been trying to keep it from us . . . people in positions of power forgot about certain communities" (p. 42).

METCO alumni's most powerful memories typically involved straddling "two worlds" and becoming aware of "crossing the line" by shifting their language or outward appearances. By themselves, these cultural differences did not bother most alumni; the deeper problems were "white reactions to difference" (pp. 47, 80). Several alumni recalled troubling incidents where whites misinterpreted black student groups as "street gangs" and aggressively punished everyday black student social behaviors. "We had issues where the METCO students were being perceived as loud, rowdy, just out of control," explained one male graduate. "But if you look at where we come from, we come from a culture that emphasizes music, laughter. If you go to our churches, there is music, there is dance. We shout. . . So here we are, we're leaving our community that doesn't exactly emphasize these kinds of things. You are then taken out of context. It's misreading" (p. 78).

Despite these cultural clashes, Eaton reports that former METCO students did "not recall resisting academic success" nor associating it with "acting white," as anthropologists John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham have interpreted lower black academic achievement in other settings (pp. 94, 242-4). Ogbu's theory holds that while all minorities face discriminatory barriers in a majority society, "voluntary minorities" who migrated of their own accord are more likely to generate pro-schooling cultural frameworks than "involuntary minorities" whose ancestors had been enslaved or relocated under duress. But how does Ogbu deal with blacks who chose to participate in METCO-style city-to-suburb busing programs, or those who permanently migrated to the suburbs, either through governmental housing programs or private real estate markets? Have they become culturally transformed into "voluntary minorities"—or not? Ogbu's latest ethnography, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* (2003), about black families who moved into the formerly all-white suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, does not answer these questions, and future researchers would be wise to contemplate how they played out in Eaton's study.

Eaton's other chapters weigh "The Gains" against "The Resolutions," (which, interestingly, Eaton did not name "The Losses"). After years of learning to straddle fences between two communities, METCO alumni generally reported that they felt more "comfortable" in predominantly white settings than they otherwise suspect they would have been. Growing familiar with white suburban school culture gave them the confidence to step into white colleges and workplaces. Furthermore, the METCO experience also channeled many of them onto the "inside tracks" where they acquired personal information and social prestige for educational and professional advancement (p. 118). Yet these benefits came with significant costs. Many METCO alumni described varying degrees of alienation from their local neighborhoods and the broader black community. More than two-thirds of the author's sample reported an absence of black history in their suburban schools, and they frequently expressed "a strong desire to be totally all-black in an all-black place," with many dreaming about attending an historically black college (pp. 169, 174). Eaton expertly weaves together both the positives and the negatives of her narrators' stories, connecting them to the broader academic literature on the long-term outcomes of school desegregation (Wells and Crain, 1994) and psychological theories of racial identity development (Tatum, 1997).

Overall, METCO alumni's personal memories of the program varied widely. Eaton reports that about 20 percent expressed positive memories of METCO, 70 percent mixed, and 10 percent negative (p. 197). But this is not the author's final conclusion. Instead, Eaton's boldest argument addresses how alumni responded to her two specific interview questions regarding their willingness to participate in the program again: If you could go back in time, would you repeat the METCO experience? Would you want your child or one close to you to have the [METCO] experience? (p. 278)

"Remarkably," Eaton claims in her introduction, "nearly all the adults represented here said they would indeed repeat their METCO experience could they go back in time. (Just four of the sixty-five said otherwise.)" (p. 21). While readers might logically assume that METCO alumni having positive memories would desire to repeat the program, and those having negative memories would not (and so on), her results defied this expected pattern. "The quality of one's experience in METCO is rarely the most important consideration" when alumni decided whether or not they would repeat the program, Eaton claims. Instead, she traces their predominantly favorable response to their "real-world experiences. . . in either college or the workforce, [when] they began to see clearly the reasons they were placed in suburban schools to begin with" (p. 198). According to this interpretation, the value of educational and economic opportunities that METCO provided to African Americans far outweighed their personal recollections of discrimination and racial disconnection in the program. The passage of time helped alumni to put their pioneering experiences with school desegregation into a long-term perspective. According to the author, "It was fairly common for men and women to say that if they had been asked in junior or senior high school: 'Would you go through METCO again?' they likely would have answered, 'no.' But if you ask the same question of the same people, five, ten, fifteen, even twenty years after they're out, they most often say 'yes' " (p. 198).

But as Eaton unfolds the evidence behind her argument, the interview responses do not fit so neatly into these simplistic "yes" or "no" categories. Instead, she groups them into four thematic categories and offers approximate numbers for each. The first category, "METCO's cheerleaders," numbered "less than a dozen" who replied "yes," without hesitation, that they would personally repeat the city-suburb busing experience (p. 205). (No data are presented about their responses to sending their children.) Despite any "personal problems" that these individuals may have encountered in suburban schools, such problems were outweighed by better job, college, and housing opportunities. Eaton's second category is the "Yes, but. . ." group, consisting of "just over thirty" alumni who "would place a child in METCO only on certain conditions." Some would consent only if the child maintained strong ties to other black institutions, or if white suburban schools began to view METCO children as positive contributors (rather than "charity cases"), or if they could be assured that the child would not be tracked into lower-level courses (pp. 206-11). (No data are provided about whether or not the adults in this group would personally repeat the program.) Eaton labels her third category, "I guess I have to," grouping fourteen individuals who stated that "they would repeat their experiences and place their children in white suburban schools, [but] nevertheless see METCO as the best choice among inadequate options" (p. 212). These alumni were most critical of the quality of mainstream Boston public schools, the lack of space in the elite public college preparatory schools, and the high cost of private schools. Furthermore, they leaned towards choosing METCO "with far more hesitation and uncertainty" than did others (p. 212). The fourth and final category, "No going back," describes alumni who "are sure that they would neither repeat the program nor send their own child-actual or hypothetical-to a METCO school" (p. 198). At first, Eaton states that "just four" individuals were in this group, counting those who replied "no" to both questions about repeating the program and sending their children. But when focusing on those who responded negatively to the first question, the total number in this group rose to eight (pp. 198, 214).

How do Eaton's numbers add up? Given the author's imprecise reporting of interview data, we reconstructed numbers from her text and repackaged them into a tabular format:

Would you repeat the program or send a child?		
Yes ("cheerleaders")	11	17%
Yes, but. . .	32	49%
I Guess I Have To	14	22%
No Going Back	8	12%
Total	65	

*Table 1 - METCO Alumni Responses
(Numbers Reconstructed from Eaton's Text)*

Reanalyzing Eaton's data in this format raises questions about her initial claim that "nearly all" METCO alumni would repeat the program (p. 21). Technically, that claim is true, since the majority of alumni did lean toward "yes" when pressed by the interviewer. But Eaton's introductory remarks do not accurately characterize the full range of their comments. On closer examination of the body of her book's evidence, only 17 percent of alumni gave an enthusiastic "yes" to going through the program a second time. The vast majority gave a more qualified affirmation (over 70 percent when combining the author's "Yes, but. . ." and "I guess I have to" categories). Overall, when sorting alumni reactions to repeating METCO into three categories, the results are 17 percent positive, 71 percent mixed, and 12 percent negative. That breakdown looks remarkably similar to Eaton's description of the alumni's overall memories of the program—20 percent positive, 70 percent mixed, and 10 percent negative—thereby raising doubt about her other claim that these two sets of responses were substantially different (p. 197).

Several pages later, after Eaton concludes that the METCO interviews demonstrate that the positives outweighed the negative

aspects of the experience, she briefly inserts one line: “But there is much ambivalence within these answers” (p. 226). Here lies the book’s hidden thesis, another side of the “other” Boston busing story that remains largely untold. Despite the author’s rosy introduction, over 70 percent of the alumni gave conflicted responses about repeating METCO or sending their children, by asserting that they would participate only if key reforms were made in the program, or stating that their decisions were profoundly shaped by the lack of quality educational alternatives. To better understand this predominant theme of ambivalence, which Eaton chose not to emphasize in her book’s introduction, we decided to conduct a parallel study of a similar program and to analyze our own set of alumni interviews.

Investigating ambivalence and constraint in Hartford’s Project Concern

One hundred miles away from Boston sits the city of Hartford, Connecticut, the home of a closely related voluntary desegregation program named Project Concern, which bused children to suburban schools from 1966 to 1998. Working together with our colleagues in the *Cities, Suburbs, and Schools* undergraduate seminar at Trinity College, we read Eaton’s book on METCO and constructed a parallel study of Project Concern alumni. Our project would not have been possible without the author’s openness and cooperation. Eaton greatly assisted us by publishing a detailed methodology and her complete interview guide in the book’s appendix, and kindly offered advice to our seminar through a telephone conference call. We also benefited from a partnership we formed with the former long-term director of Project Concern and the manager of the present-day program. They provided us with an initial list of alumni who still lived in the Hartford region, who led us to others through the same chain-referral sampling methods that Eaton used. Our final sample of 24 individuals was comprised of 15 females and 9 males, who enrolled in ten different suburban school districts through Project Concern, representing graduation-year cohorts from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. While our class project conducted only one-third of Eaton’s total number of interviews, it still allowed us to make some general comparisons with her findings (Project Concern Oral History Interviews, 2003).

But we analyzed our interview transcripts with a different approach than Eaton. First, to investigate the degree of ambivalence among Project Concern alumni, we sorted responses about their willingness to repeat the program into three (not four) categories: those who answered “yes,” they would definitely repeat Project Concern; those who gave an ambivalent response with some expression of doubt or reservation; and those who replied with a definitive “no.” Our middle category merged two of Eaton’s labels (“Yes, but. . .” and “I guess I have to”) to combine responses that we believed to be more similar than different at this level. Second, we analyzed the transcripts again to determine whether alumni suggested that the voluntary Project Concern program was a “forced choice,” due to the lack of quality educational options in the city or racial and economic barriers to securing housing in the suburbs. Although neither Eaton nor we asked a specific question about this topic during the interviews, we could not ignore its frequent appearance in the transcripts. Some alumni spoke explicitly about “forced choices” surrounding Project Concern, such as one female who explained that “If you are stuck, as a parent. . . and you can’t put yourself in the neighborhood that you want your kids to go to school in, then you have no choice” but to be in the city-to-suburb desegregation program. Others spoke about these same constraints in less explicit terms, by pointing out the many failures in Hartford public schools or the excessive housing costs in suburban communities. Since the prevalence of “forced choice” themes were not necessarily linked to individual alumni’s responses to the question about repeating the busing program, we decided not to follow Eaton’s approach (the “I guess I have to” label) and recorded its presence in a separate analysis.

Would you repeat the program or send a child?	Stated or implied a “forced choice”			
			Yes	No
Yes	12	50%	5	7
Ambivalent	9	38%	6	3
No	3	12%	3	0
Total	24		14 58%	10 42%

Table 2 - Project Concern Alumni Responses

Despite our relatively small sample size, we can draw some general comparisons between the METCO and Project Concern interviews, and probe more deeply into selected aspects of the latter group. First, while the alumni in our sample were much more likely to answer definitively “yes” to repeating the program than Eaton’s METCO sample (50 percent versus 17 percent), the significant number of clearly ambivalent responses (38 percent) and negative responses (12 percent) among Project Concern alumni cannot be ignored. The fact that half would repeat the Connecticut program, while the other half were not sure or said no, confirms our skepticism of Eaton’s initial claim that “nearly all” would repeat METCO if given the opportunity. Second, moving to the right side of the table, a majority of the Project Concern sample (58 percent) suggested that the program represented a “forced choice.” While the three alumni who responded “no” to repeating the program all expressed this theme, this same response also made a significant showing among the “ambivalent” and “yes” groups. To be clear, not a single alumni called for eliminating the Project Concern program. In fact, some graduates who would refuse to repeat the program or who criticized “forced choices”

advocated for the program's continuation as strongly as its "cheerleaders," on the grounds that parents of color in Hartford need more choices for their children, not fewer choices.

Translating research into policy talk

Across the nation, school integration programs are facing intense legal and political challenges, a fact very much on the minds of Eaton and co-author Gary Orfield from their previous book, *Dismantling Desegregation* (1996). Eaton points our attention to the heated policy debates looming over the embattled METCO program, which in recent years some white Boston suburban districts have threatened to abandon (p. 7). In nearby Hartford, the Project Concern program faced severe budget cuts as the dwindling number of suburban school openings dropped the level of city student enrollments from a peak of nearly 1,300 down to 500. In 1998, Project Concern was eliminated and absorbed into the state legislature's strategic plan for addressing racially desegregated schools, which maintained its voluntary nature and renamed it the Capitol Region Choice Program. Advocates of the change point out that this new program supports two-way desegregation—from city to suburban schools, and vice versa—and that enrollments are scheduled to increase as part of the 2003 *Sheff v O'Neill* school desegregation settlement. But long-time Project Concern supporters argue that merely busing students between segregated districts, without providing race relations educators to support these transitions, does not by itself constitute an effective desegregation program (Green, 1997, 1998; Frahm, 1998, 2003). As these disputes continue, the overall status and quality of voluntary city-suburban school desegregation programs hang in the balance.

Given this context, it should not surprise anyone that Eaton concludes *The Other Boston Busing Story* by translating her research findings into a strong policy stance in favor of continuing the program. But we are troubled that nearly all signs of ambivalence from the METCO alumni interviews seem to evaporate from the text as the author plunges into her policy conclusions (p. 226 ff). Eaton raises and then eloquently refutes the three most common objections raised against METCO-style programs. First, to the argument that scarce resources would be better spent on improving black urban schools, she responds that racism is a metropolitan problem that requires metropolitan solutions. Second, to the criticism that suburban busing disconnects urban youth from their neighborhoods and thereby internalizes racism, Eaton replies that her interviews show how alumni deliberately remained connected with black communities. Third, to the charge that confrontations with racism at such an early age hurt black youth, she argues that the alternative of segregated schooling is unthinkable, and that alumni perceived these painful experiences as preparation for the real world to come. Overall, Eaton defends METCO by reiterating her interpretation that "many" of its graduates would repeat the program, a claim that masks the underlying ambivalence and constraints in the interviews (pp. 247-50). As a policy defense of city-suburban desegregation for the twenty-first century, Eaton's book succeeds. But as a research study that promises to reveal how African-American graduates perceive the complex METCO experience, some findings are given much more emphasis than others.

Buried in Eaton's conclusion is a deeper and more troubling truth about city-suburban desegregation policy: these programs operate "on terms that suburbanites can accept" (p. 221). Just as the politics of implementing one-way desegregation largely protected white interests in the South during the 1960s, so too did Northeastern regions design programs like METCO and Project Concern to retain existing privileges over public schooling. Wealthy whites continue to choose where they wish to purchase homes, and therefore educate their children, in suburban communities. Also, their suburban boards of education can choose whether or not to participate in one-way busing programs from city schools, how many city children to accept, and whether to isolate them in one particular school or disperse them across an entire suburban district. Simply transporting between one to three thousand self-selected city students to an array of suburban schools each year leaves the existing framework of public schooling in the broader metropolitan area largely intact. To be sure, once a suburban district chooses to accept METCO or Project Concern children, it must tolerate them to *some* extent. But as a desegregation policy, this arrangement saves suburbanites from making what most would perceive to be an unacceptable sacrifice: being required to enroll their children in a city (or even a regional) public school system. By contrast, the forced choices fall largely to urban families of color, who must decide whether the risks and benefits of busing their children long distances into sometimes hostile white suburban schools outweigh the limited educational opportunities found in overburdened and underfunded urban schools. When viewed from this perspective, the "voluntary" label commonly used to describe METCO-style programs seems to fit suburban interests more so than urban ones.

School desegregation advocates need to recognize the "forced choices" that lay imbedded within many existing programs and consider ways of raising this issue to reframe discussions on school reform. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown* decision, we must remember that neither desegregation policies—nor the underlying forms of racism they were designed to challenge—stand still over time. School reform movements continue to evolve, as new coalitions emerge and adapt to changing historical contexts over time. Desegregation advocates like Eaton would be wise to study closely the political dynamics that drive the free-market vouchers movement, rather than dismissing it out of hand (p. 255). Although polling data varies widely on this issue, some well-respected national surveys indicate that African-American support for private school vouchers has risen from a minority to a majority-held opinion over the past decade (Bositis, 2003). Even polls that dispute this finding concede the existence of an African-American generational split on vouchers, with stronger support coming from younger respondents with school-age children (National School Boards Association, 2001). We suspect that African-American support for the "choice" movement has grown in response to the "forced choices" that result from continued discrimination and the limitations posed by white-dominated

school desegregation policies in addressing it. Let us be perfectly clear: "choice," by itself, is not a magic pill that produces quality education, but neither can the same be said about "desegregation." In order to move forward on educational and social reform that addresses racial and economic justice, we must listen more closely to the themes of ambivalence and constraint as expressed by METCO and Project Concern alumni, and reflect on their deeper meaning for our future efforts.

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record* Volume 106 Number 5, 2004, p. 985-996
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 11225, Date Accessed: 7/31/2011 7:33:12 PM

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