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Oral History Interview on School Residency and Civil Rights (with video)

David Baram

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Location: Capitol Building, Hartford, CT

Recording format: video file

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Length: 13:28

Transcribed by: Richelle Benjamin, Trinity Class of '15

Additional files: n/a

Abstract:

David Baram, state representative from Bloomfield, gives his perspective on the 1985 Bloomfield residency case involving four parents, including Hartford mother Sandra Foster, who were arrested for enrolling their children in Bloomfield schools. Representative Baram was the mayor of Bloomfield during the time this case was taking place. Baram explains that the majority of politicians in the town were unaware of the problem of line jumping prior to the arrests made in 1985, saying that it was entirely the school board's decision to go to the police—a decision that was later criticized by many other surrounding districts. Today, David Baram supports the decriminalization of the act of crossing district boundary lines and proposes a more regionalized approach to education in the state of Connecticut. He argues that with shared resources, students from multiple districts can all benefit from improved schools.

Speaker key:

RB: Richelle Benjamin

DB: David Baram

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

RB: Uh, um, go ahead and introduce yourself and, and tell me what you do.

DB: I'm David Baram and I represent the town of Bloomfield and a small slice of Windsor. It's the 15th, uh, district assembly. I'm a former mayor of the town of Bloomfield and a former chairman of the Capitol Region Council of Governments. Um, my occupation is an attorney, I practice in, in Bloomfield. [00:00:24.01]

RB: And how long were you the mayor of Bloomfield?

DB: I was the mayor for seven years.

RB: Okay.

DB: The youngest mayor in Bloomfield, at the time.

RB: Congratulations.

DB: Thank you.

RB: Um, so you were the mayor of Bloomfield at the time of the 1985 case. And, um, can you describe the case from your own perspective as the mayor?

DB: Sure. Well, Bloomfield is a, uh, town of about twenty thousand people, and it was proclaimed in the 1970's as an all-American city, um, because of our efforts at promoting diversity, and, uh, the demographic composition of Bloomfield is one where we have, um, very large groups of, um, ethnic, racial, religious, um, uh, diversity. Um, and Bloomfield has really, um, made itself unique because of its efforts to promote, um, a place where everybody is welcome and that's why we were recognize as an all-American city. Um, traditionally, we have put a lot of money toward education because that is considered a a priority in the town, and in the 1980's, um, our education system was considered, you know, a very good one, and at the time other towns around us, um, their their systems were considered not as good, at least from perception. I don't know if it was based on reality. And we had a number of students that were coming to Bloomfield from other towns, um, to become part of our educational system. Uh, sometimes, they came from the city of Hartford, we had some students from the town of Windsor, and other places, and what normally would happen is the students would come and live with a relative, it could be a a grandparent, or an uncle, or aunt, and then they would register and indicate that their primary residence was in the town of Bloomfield. Um, like many other towns, Bloomfield, uh, hired a residency officer who was supposed to investigate complaints, uh, about students who might not be true residents of the town. And, if they found a student who was attending our school system, who really didn't have residency, um, the residency officer would institute, um, a hearing procedure, and if they were found to be in violation of the residency rules, um, they could be dismissed from school so that they would have to go back to their home and attend schools. Well, apparently a number of students at the time were identified within the school system. The rest of us in, um, Bloomfield government were not made aware at the time that any of this was going on, because the whole process was supposed to be a confidential process, a civil process, and to make it as non-threatening as possible. Unfortunately, the school officials, on their own initiative, um, involved the police department, and the police came in and arrested some of the students, uh, and that coincidentally happened, um, also in the town of Windsor at about the same time. Some of the students who got involved in this were from the city of Hartford, and the then mayor of the city of Hartford, um, was, um, uh, outraged because, uh, he felt that there was an excessive, um, police presence and that students, you know, should not have been dealt with in in a criminal, um, way. That this was really a civil issue. And the second big, uh, controversy that arose from this was the whole issue of education. It brought it toward the forefront. Um, should we as a state of Connecticut, um, be fostering, uh, education on town boundaries? Or should it be something that was more regional and something that reached out to, you know, all groups regardless of your economic status or where you lived, so that you could enjoy the same kind of education that children in more fluent towns, or children in even poor towns, but towns that put more money toward education, uh, enjoyed? And he raised some, you know, some very, um, uh, some very priority questions. Um, being mayor, um, there was a somewhat of an obligation on me to, um, defend, uh, my my town, uh, to some extent, in terms of the existing, um, dispensation of education. The fact that, um, each town, under the law had

the right to enforce residency, uh, because when you have students coming in from out of town and you're paying per pupil amount to, um, foster education, it it it's taxing on the town in terms of the amount of money you're you're spending. But, I also raised the issue, um, consistent with the mayor of Hartford, that I believed that the state needed to reform its entire education system. Um, I too believe in regionalized education. Uh, I think it's, it's better for the child, it's better for society. We need to live together and students should be able to go to schools that are equally funded and have the same kind of resources that every other school has. So I clearly articulated, uh, that aspect, um, that that this had highlighted an issue that was pressing, that the state frankly just was ignoring, uh, over the years. Uh, so it did become, um, a bit contentious in public because, unfortunately, the first reaction was for everybody to attack the towns, uh, involved in it, as opposed to looking at the policy issue that fostered, you know, what happened. But then, I think everybody, once they, um, were able to express, you know, their emotions, focused on policy issues and we were pretty much all on the same page in in advocating, you know, a regionalized education system. [00:07:06.17]

RB: And, so, so this documentary that I was transcribing that I told you about, um, th-they uh, called Bloomfield a, this is a quote, "Mecca for homes, salaries, and education." And would you agree with this statement and do you think it's still true today? Do you think that this is still occurring, where families are coming from Hartford to Bloomfield and for the same reasons?

DB: I think it's happening in a lot of different towns, uh, but I think that the law is, um, a little bit more sophisticated in the sense that, um, 25 years ago, it was a little easier to say, uh, if a child was living with a grandparent or another relative, um, it it was sort of a violation of the residency, particularly if their mom or dad lived in another town. But now, frankly, a lot of students are living with relatives. Um, as an attorney I do a fair amount of divorce work, and I can't tell you when parents divorce, how many times, uh, the children, for very legitimate reasons, are living with grandparents or other, um, relatives because in a divorce situation, sometimes the parents can't afford to raise the kids anymore. Sometimes both parents are working full time and when they're split and they don't have each other to support the family, a grandparent is now taking the child. So, it's a little more complicated; it's not quite as easy as it may have been 25 years ago when people really didn't understand some of these issues. Uh, and I think towns are more tolerant, uh, of the fact that kids are are living with other family members. But Bloomfield, today, does put a lot of resources into education. We have some major challenges, our our education system is, um, not as, uh, spectacular as it used to be. We we have some challenges, um, that many of the big cities have, and we have drastically improved our scores. We just went through a hundred million dollar, uh, bond issue that renovated all our schools, put in the most sophisticated electronics, and, and because we felt that the kids should have a good place to to learn. And that was part of the learning environment to get kids to focus on, on their studies, and we're trying and were competitive in our teacher hiring in terms of salaries to try and attract, you know, the best teachers. We have a new superintendent who's been with us a couple of years from the city of Hartford, who has done spectacular, um, job in terms of increasing the student's scores. So, from some of the other surrounding towns, maybe Bloomfield is considered a Mecca for education, uh, but the the policy issue of trying to foster regionalized education, I think is, um, more important than it, than it used to be, and I think that the state is slowly going in that direction wanting to look at magnet schools, charter schools, community schools. Um, there're different types of, um, vehicles that we're we're looking at to

promote education. Nobody knows exactly what is going to work and the right one. But over time, I think that municipal boundary lines will become less important and we will really be looking at a regionalized education system. One of the reasons that that will also be promoted is cost becomes a factor, towns trying to reduce their taxes and hold their cost, it's much cheaper for a group of towns to get together and collaborate on education than it is for one town to try and fund education by itself. [00:11:14.18]

RB: OK, um, I know we have to cut this a little bit short, um, but, um, I guess as the last question, um, well, and I'll ask you the same question I asked Representative Morris, but, what changes would you, would you really like to see made in schools districts across Connecticut?

DB: I would like to see the state come up with a fair funding formula. The, um, education cost formula ECS that has been in effect for many years, I believe, does not incorporate the number of factors that should be considered in distributing state moneys to the towns, that's number one. Number two, I would like to see us continue to promote magnet schools and and, uh, regionalized education, uh, I I would like to see us create incentives, um, where we gave financial assistance to towns that voluntarily did that as well, where, where municipalities could talk to one another and say, "Instead of building two high schools right next to each other within ten miles because it's two different towns, let's build one high school on the border where both towns can share it. Instead of two superintendents, let's have one superintendent. Instead of math teachers in each school, let's combine, you know, space and have one, you know, have the best math program, the best science, um, um, writing courses and do it cooperatively where we can all pool our resources and do the very best that we can." Um, the world is getting smaller and boundary lines are disappearing and it's important that we realize that today we have a very diverse society and we need to make sure that we learn to live together, that everybody gets the same educational opportunities, and I believe that the best way to do that is to promote a regionalized education system. [00:13:24.15]

RB: Okay, thank you.

DB: Sure.