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The Making & Memories of BUILD Academy: The Rise of a Black Community School in
Buffalo During the Late 1960s

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Introduction

In 1968, a struggle that ensued at Buffalo Public School #48 set the stage for a massive effort to reform the city's educational system. School administrators decided to transfer a well respected black teacher who was hired to work in a third grade classroom. As a result of their displeasure, parents and community members organized a boycott in which they refused to send their children to school. Following that boycott, the education committee of Buffalo's Black Power organization--BUILD (Build, Unity, Independence, Liberty and Dignity)--entered into negotiations with the Board of Education and The State Teacher's College at Buffalo to formally establish BUILD Academy in 1969.¹ The Academy was publicly funded but had a governing board consisting of community members who managed the school's operation. In the fall of 1969, the new community-controlled Buffalo Public School opened to serve children from kindergarten up to sixth grade. BUILD appeared to be the immediate result of conditions at School #48, but there must have been other underlying forces that were aggravated by the incident that occurred in 1968. Black Buffalonians had long been disappointed with the educational system, but the community had not garnered institutional support to formalize their own school. With this in mind, the following questions will be investigated: What were the social conditions that fueled this particular protest and led to the creation of an entirely new institution, BUILD Academy? Furthermore, what long-term meaning did the school have for some members of the community?

¹ Siskar, John. 1997. "The B.U.I.L.D Academy: A Historical Study of Community Action and Education Action in Buffalo, New York." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 21 (1):25.

When BUILD Academy began in 1969, it was not necessarily because of the incident at School #48, but because the social conditions were ripe for a black community school. When the beloved teacher at School #48 was dismissed in 1968, it sparked a larger reaction that would not have taken place even two to three years prior. First, discriminatory practices and residential segregation had become much more apparent. Secondly, the issue of school segregation, which was a result of residential segregation, was not being adequately addressed. Lastly, by 1969, community members had begun to form their own community programs and had the benefit of a community organization that was already envisioning a better educational system *before* the school teacher had been transferred. The BUILD organization was merely waiting for the right moment to mobilize the community to fight for their own school. If the incident at School #48 was the spark, then the combined forces of residential segregation, inadequate school integration, and growing community power, compelled Buffalo's black community to establish a new school. Once the school opened, oral history interviews with BUILD Academy participants suggest that the most important long term impact of the school was its emphasis on black pride and engaging learning. Due to the school's emergence in a time of strong racial tensions, it was important to have an institution willing to validate the importance of black lives.

Methodology

Two forms of data were consulted to answer the research questions mentioned above: historical and qualitative. This research is based on events that happened over 40 years ago so most of the material had to be gathered from old letter correspondences between BUILD members, news articles, or other archival documents that were written during the time period. More specifically, the microfilmed "BUILD Files" contained community notices on protests and reports on segregated institutions that were used to gain a better understanding of social

conditions at the time. More than 300 documents were gathered and these texts are accessible to the public in at least two locations: (1) William A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies at the Frank E. Merriweather Library, and (2) The Monroe Fordham Regional History Center. Both centers are located in Buffalo, New York. Interviews were conducted to learn more about the meaning that the school held for members of the community. Using the snowball method, I was able to interview three former teachers and three former students who were part of the BUILD community within the first ten years of its opening. Respondents were questioned about the times in which they attended BUILD Academy, what BUILD had to offer, and if their time at the school was an influential factor in their life at all. Since the former students provided more rich responses about the school's personal impact, the responses of the teachers were omitted from the project. All of the participants orally consented to making their personal information available to the public, and no institutional review board was necessary to approve my research.

Literature Review

Even though BUILD Academy was specific to Buffalo, New York, a black community school that served as an alternative to the oppressive educational system was not unique to Buffalo alone. BUILD was one of the many black community schools cropping up around the country during the late 1960s. However, these schools were more commonly referred to as liberation or freedom schools.

While 'freedom school' and 'liberation school' are sometimes used interchangeably, they are distinct schools with different philosophical underpinnings. Freedom schools were largely founded in the American South through the efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)-- a prominent civil rights organization that organized projects in the South.

In an effort to address the lack of education for black children in Mississippi, SNCC activists created freedom schools. Freedom schools were a free alternative to the traditional models of education, as well as the growing progressive education model. Progressive education was a movement led by philosopher John Dewey, who believed that education should be child centered and allow students to learn through their environment. This reformed model of education proposed by white theorists, was not an adequate model to be generalized for all communities.² Due to the drastic difference in the environment of black children, current literature suggests that it could not be assumed that black students would engage with meaning making of their environment in the same ways that white children would. Thus, freedom schools were created to help students reconstruct their world and become social change agents, rather than simply exploring the environment they were in.

By 1970, activists were losing hope that social change could be achieved by developing solutions in which black people could become more integrated into society. As an alternative to the integrationist aims of freedom schools, the Black Panther Party founded its first liberation school in June of 1969.³ The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California in 1966 with the original goal of patrolling black neighborhoods and defending residents from police brutality. Overtime, the party evolved and devoted a large amount of time to social programs. Where the freedom schools encouraged students to draw from their experiences to envision a better society, the Black Panther Party did not. Black Panther activists were convinced that racism was a permanent tenet of American society which obstructed students' ability to understand their identity and true needs based upon their experiences in the American

² Perlstein, Daniel. 2004, "Minds Stayed on Freedom: Politics and Pedagogy in the African American Freedom Struggle," *Radical Teacher*, no. 69 (May): 23.

³ Perlstein, Minds Stayed on Freedom:26.

environment.⁴ Consequently, liberation schools were more traditional in the sense that they were teacher centered rather than student centered. Teachers drove the direction of classroom learning in order to cultivate knowledge and skills in areas black students had not previously been exposed to.

Unlike the programs created by SNCC or the Black Panther Party, BUILD Academy cannot be definitively categorized as a freedom or liberation school. As outlined above, liberation schools were much more political and teacher driven. The BUILD model of education was more similar to freedom schools in that the school provided the opportunity for students to learn more about themselves and their history in order to construct a positive identity. Administrators at BUILD worked to achieve “Responsive Environment Classrooms” in which (1) the family was mainly responsible for educating students (2) the school was expected to have multiple programs to serve students and (3) the school should incorporate the cultural values/background of its students.⁵ BUILDs model was infused with the ideas of John Dewey and earlier models of formal education. However, black educators in freedom schools argued that progressive education theorists, like Dewey, were generalizing a white model onto black students.

Rather than debate the philosophies that influenced the BUILD education model, this work will make connections between the social conditions outside of the school system that influenced the creation and goals of BUILD. Unlike the freedom schools in the South or the liberation schools on the West Coast, Buffalo was dealing with issues specific to northern cities.

⁴ Perlstein, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*:25.

⁵ Siskar, John. 1997, “The B.U.I.L.D Academy: A Historical Study of Community Action and Education Action in Buffalo, New York,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, 21 (1):30.

The uniqueness of BUILD made it a potentially more appropriate model for education, not only for black students, but for schools throughout Buffalo. The nature of freedom and liberation schools hindered them from being sustainable. As a result, most of these schools that were established during the 1960s and 70s are no longer in existence. This research paper will highlight the conditions that inspired the creation of a black community school and the meaning that the school held for some members of the community.

Context

In 1967, just one year prior to the event that compelled black Buffalo to petition for a community controlled school, the city had been shaken by a spontaneous youth uprising. Initial assumptions would rule that police brutality was the cause of such a visceral response. However, closer attention to detail suggests that the one case of police brutality was merely a spark that had ignited a gas tank of racial tension, discriminatory firing practices, unemployment and built up abuse in the black community. As a demonstration of their contempt for police brutality as well as unjust living conditions, tear gas, bullets, and firebombs ignited the East and West Side of Buffalo as angry residents and police took to the streets. One year later, Buffalo convulsed under the duress of street demonstrations yet again following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The death of black America's major civil rights leader left Buffalo's residents sore as well as roused to confront the major issues impacting their daily lives. By the time that black parents were left enraged with the actions of School #48, the BUILD organization had already planted roots in the community, which allowed them to help residents channel their rage into political action. Hence, protest of School #48 was not an isolated incident and likely would not have happened without residents' pent up frustrations concerning their marginalization in other aspects of their life. To understand how BUILD Academy came to be, this paper analyzes how

residential segregation, inadequate school integration, and growing community power made Buffalo fertile ground for mobilization around a community school.

Racism & Residential Segregation

It is nearly impossible to understand the specific issues confronting Buffalo's black community without acknowledging the city's long history of residential segregation. Prior to the massive migration of black Southerners that began in the late 1930s, Buffalo was already racially segregated. The city was divided into 12 districts: Riverside, North Park, University, Niagara, Elmwood, Masten Park, East Delavan, Central, Ellicott, East Side, Buffalo River, and South Park.⁶ Generally, Polish immigrants dominated the Riverside district, the East Side and South Park. English Canadians settled in North Park, Niagara, and Elmwood. A portion of Central District was largely populated by Italians while African Americans were concentrated in Masten Park and Ellicott districts. Most Germans lived in the East Delavan districts and a decent Irish population lived by the Buffalo River.

Between 1940 and 1970, the period known as the Second Great Migration, black migrants flooded into the city, only to be filtered into depressed neighborhoods. When the city began planning for the construction of housing projects to accommodate the rapidly expanding population, the idea of integrated housing was not very popular. Non-black residents made their position known in 1941 when plans for housing projects was being drafted: "Poles and Irish, in this instance, fought the erections of integrated housing in their neighborhoods."⁷ When the first housing project was finally erected in 1953, it was located in an all white neighborhood.

Although the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority did not confess to discriminating against

⁶ Price, Alfred D. 1991 "Urban Renewal: The Case of Buffalo, N.Y." *Review of Black Political Economy*, 19 (3):136.

⁷ "Segregated Housing and Segregated Schools," The Build Files, Williams A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies, 1.

black residents, there were no black tenants. One might question whether the demographics of the housing project were the result of a lack of diverse applicants. According to the Buffalo Urban League, that could not be the case. The organization itself had registered 24 families for housing requests.⁸ This glaring disparity led to further investigation on the part of the Urban League. Unsurprisingly, the league discovered that representatives from Washington who were supervising the project through the Federal Public Works administration, recommended that “no Negroes be admitted to the project.”⁹ About one year after this white housing project was constructed, the city approved plans for the Willert Park Housing project, which was the first black project in the city.¹⁰

On the surface, it may seem like residential segregation was harmless, but that could not be further from the truth. Outside of the creation of housing projects, black families were intentionally funneled into some of the worst neighborhoods in the city. Ellicott and Central district became home to thousands of new black residents. In a study conducted by City Planning Associates-East, Inc. in 1963, the company found that districts with larger concentrations of black people were experiencing severe overcrowding. For instance, the East Side district contained eight different neighborhoods with about 57,000 people living in approximately 19,000 housing units.¹¹ Whereas, the Ellicott District--where many black families lived--was one of the smallest districts in the city, but it consisted of twelve neighborhoods and more than 41,000 people on only 1,350 acres of land.¹² According to political scientist Neil Kraus, black Buffalonians lived in terrible conditions because new housing was not created to accommodate

⁸ Segregated Housing and Segregated Schools,1.

⁹ Ibid.,1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ City Planning Associates-East, Inc.1963. “Community Renewal Program: A Preliminary Report,” *The Grosvenor Room*, Buffalo and Erie County Public Library,153.

¹² “Community Renewal Program: A Preliminary Report,”153.

the population that had arrived. Black residents lived in some of the oldest houses in Buffalo, some even dating back to the late nineteenth century.¹³ Areas that had higher concentrations of black families were known for, “highest concentrations of structures with deficiencies, renter occupied units lacking adequate plumbing facilities, overcrowded units, vacant units and low property values.”¹⁴ Inadequate living conditions, health complications and elevated mortality rates, were just a few of the detrimental symptoms that arose from severe overcrowding.¹⁵ Poor living conditions and discriminatory residential practices were not isolated issues. These problems provided the breeding grounds for chaos in the black community. Residential segregation was arguably the fuel or the starting point from which other issues flowed. Without discriminatory practices and residential segregation, school segregation and educational disparities between different races may not have been a problem. If requests to be fairly integrated into the workforce and living spaces were acknowledged, there would have been no need for an influx of community organizations and the subsequent establishment of BUILD Academy.

The Stalled Struggle for Integration

Inadequate school integration and poor educational facilities for school children were two of the most direct effects of residential segregation. With most of Buffalo’s black population confined to one central location, integration was a difficult task to achieve. It was not until the late 1960s that the Board of Education even implemented a comprehensive plan for school integration. Under the auspices of James E. Allen, Jr., the New York State Commissioner of

¹³ Kraus, Neil. 2000, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power: Buffalo Politics, 1934-1997*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 90.

¹⁴ “Community Renewal Program,” vi.

¹⁵ *Race, Neighborhoods and Community Power*, 93.

Education, Buffalo launched its Quality Integrated Education (QIE) program in 1967.¹⁶ Before the first year was complete, the program managed to transfer 825 students to receiving schools.¹⁷ Generally parents and students were supportive of the program and over time it yielded measurable benefits. Two years after the QIE program started, The Division of Curriculum Evaluation and Development found that black students going to integrated schools made greater educational gains than the students at the schools that they left. For instance, in a reading study completed for children from schools 15 and 37, the results showed that after one year, there were better reading scores among students who left the schools compared to those who stayed.¹⁸ With each passing year, more students were enrolled in the QIE initiative. Where 1,200 “inner city students” were being transferred to receiving schools in 1967, by 1970 that number had increased to 2,650.¹⁹ It is important to note that during that time, “inner-city” was a coded word used to refer to black students or students of color. It is also important to highlight that integration required black students to move into predominantly white schools, but did not encourage white students to transfer into predominantly black schools.

Since city officials waited so long to attempt ending school segregation, it seems that the community was not left with many other choices to improve the educational situation. The integration program was experiencing some progress but the program had begun much too late. Parents could not continue waiting around, hoping that integration would be the silver bullet to resolve educational failures in the city. In addition to integration efforts coming too late, the process also moved too slow to convince the larger community that they should entrust their

¹⁶ School Integration Advisory Committee, “Did You Know? Factsheet,” March 31, 1974, The BUILD Files, Williams A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies, 2.

¹⁷ “Did You Know? Factsheet,” 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹ Laing, Donald S., “Board of Education Meeting,” 1971, The BUILD Files, Williams A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies, 2.

child's education to the success of integrated schooling. Even by 1971, about 3,200 black students were being integrated, but that still meant that 23,800 students of color were being left behind.²⁰ Thus, integration was not an efficient means of ensuring all students had equal access to quality education. Clyde Giles, the chairman of BUILD's education committee, was provided with a report on why integration could not be the only answer for Buffalo's children. Under the heading "Buffalo Public Schools Integration Facts" the document indicates that Buffalo's Board of Education considered a school with 70% white and 30% black enrollment to be the ideal integrated school.²¹ Even in 1971, only two schools in Buffalo appeared to satisfy the Board of Education's criteria. At least 21 public schools in Buffalo were black or all black.²² So many black students would need to be bused in order for schools to be considered "desegregated" that integration would take years to achieve. If integration was the only hope of black children being properly educated, then many students would be left to suffer as small percentages of children reaped the benefits of integration.

The inefficient nature of integration meant that long stretches of time would pass before any measurable progress could be seen, but integration also implicitly reinforced a narrative of black inferiority. Rather than incorporating white students into busing programs, integration was a code word for busing black students into white schools. Instead of focusing on improving the schools that black children were attending, more attention was given to shifting black children into "better" schools that were predominately white, or fighting to keep schools from becoming all black. One example is the case of Woodlawn Junior High School. Raphael DuBard, who

²⁰ Giles, Clyde, "Buffalo Public School Integration Facts," May 19, 1971, The BUILD Files, William A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies, 4.

²¹ Giles, Clyde "General Condition," May 19, 1971, The BUILD Files, William A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies, 4.

²² Giles, "General Condition," 4.

served a period as the President of the Buffalo NAACP, distributed a message to the black community to gain support for a march. The memo called for the black community to unite on March 25th to march on City Hall and demand that Woodlawn Junior High School would be an integrated school.²³ Although the letter does not indicate what year the notice was written, it was likely dispersed in 1964. This was the year that the city finished construction of the site that the school was supposed to be located in. DuBard's hope was that winning the battle for an integrated Woodlawn Junior High would result in the subsequent integration of other schools. Such hopes were grounded in the understanding that other majority black schools did not have a reputation of being strong centers for learning. However, integration could not be a long term solution for the issue of properly educating black students. The BUILD model was a more realistic approach. BUILD Academy refocused attention on strengthening the resources in the black community rather than depending on white schools to provide seats for black children. By revitalizing current educational structures, or creating alternatives, the black community could reduce the need for integration.

Growing Community Power in Black Buffalo

Just as residents were growing tired of the slow integrationist efforts in education, similar sentiment was festering around the lack of black people's integration into society. Not only were black people segregated residentially and educationally, but they faced barriers to employment as well. According to historian Dr. Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., black Buffalonians experienced the highest rates of unemployment, worked in the least desirable jobs, and for the lowest pay.²⁴ Even with having a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

²³ March 25th Demonstration Committee, "Church Announcement," The BUILD Files, William A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies.

²⁴ Taylor, Jr., Henry Louis, 1990. *African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo's Post-Industrial City, 1940 to Present: Introduction*, Vol. 1. 2 vols. Buffalo Urban League, 9.

(NAACP), black Buffalonians were being trapped in the lower rungs of society. Displeased with their social standing, community members began forming their own organizations to address their needs. More than 600+ organizations cropped up around the city in the form of churches, block clubs, cultural groups and more.²⁵ The bulk of these organizations were established between the 1960s and 1970s. New organizations were not only crying out for inclusion into society, but for the support to be in control of their own destinies and neighborhoods. It was this desire that drove Richard D. Ford and Robert T. Coles, the president and vice president of the East Side Community Organization (ESCO), to raise funds for Saul Alinsky to come to Buffalo.²⁶

Saul Alinsky was an effective community organizer in Chicago and the co-founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). The IAF was a national community organizing network that helped local religious and civic organizations build federations to strengthen community leadership. Devoted to seeing a more equitable future, Alinsky travelled to various cities to work with local leaders (such as the presidents of local organizations) and help them develop a democratic institution that would serve the expressed needs of the community. ESCO managed to bring Alinsky to Buffalo and the BUILD organization was formed in 1966. BUILD was a federation of more than 100 black organizations and a host of subcommittees. The education committee, recreation committee, jobs and economic development, housing, health, law & court, and fundraising committee, were commissioned to address specific issues in the city of Buffalo.

It is important to note that community members were developing their own responses to unjust social conditions before the teacher at school #48 was released. Not only were there an

²⁵ *Rise of Buffalo's Post-Industrial City*, 14.

²⁶ "Dr. Alinsky Urged To Start Foundation With Funds Pledged," *Buffalo Evening News* (Buffalo, N.Y.), April 5, 1965.

abundance of community institutions, but these scattered groups pooled their resources together to provide a unified response to black issues under the umbrella of BUILD. When the black teacher was relocated to a different school, one of the community's most powerful organizations had already been entertaining ideas of a community controlled school. Thus, School #48 provided the perfect opportunity for the BUILD organization to make their ideas a reality. When BUILD emerged in 1966, its education committee wasted no time getting to work. Miriam Beale, the chairman of the education committee, supervised the committee as it spent its first year of operation compiling a report on the conditions of the public school system.²⁷ In April 1967, BUILD released the report under the title, "BUILD Black Paper Number One: The Buffalo Public Schools." The results were astonishing.

From unmaintained school facilities, to exorbitant dropout rates, and high faculty turnover, BUILD found that the school system was failing the city's children--white and black alike. Among the many catastrophes cited in the report were abominable reading scores. When analyzing the reading scores of children in Buffalo schools, only one of the white schools (school #86) was found to have reading scores that were similar to those of children in white suburban schools.²⁸ If white city children were underperforming in comparison to children who attended suburban schools, imagine how black children must have compared. African American children were found to be underperforming in comparison to their white peers, but that disparity was even more devastating when comparing their reading scores to children in the suburban white schools. Black children were, "as many as three years behind in the FOURTH grade and as many as five

²⁷ Alfonso, Rowena, 2015. "Crucial to the Survival of Black People": Local People, Black Power, and Community Organizations in Buffalo, New York, 1966-1968," *Journal of Urban History*:1-17.

²⁸ Education Committee of BUILD, "BUILD Black Paper One: The Buffalo Public Schools," April 1967, Theresa J. White Files, Monroe Fordham Regional History Center.

years behind in the SIXTH grade.”²⁹ Convinced that this situation could not be allowed to continue any longer if their children were going to have any chance at survival, BUILD prompted the community to ponder the following question: “How can Negro children compete for the good jobs if they are that far behind their white competitors so early on in their lives?”³⁰

School after school that BUILD surveyed seemed to show abysmal achievement levels. This could not be completely surprising, given the conditions under which students were expected to perform. Some schools did not even have the necessary equipment to facilitate student learning. When the committee visited Boys Vocational High School, they discovered that students were left to read classic comics since there was not enough money for books. The books that the school did have were so far beyond the boys’ reading level that they were not useful. School after school that the committee surveyed became a sickening reminder that black children were being left behind and would have little hopes of gaining power in a world where they were so poorly prepared to survive, let alone to excel.

The BUILD report did not just highlight the conditions of the schools that were surveyed, but it condemned those conditions. Along with condemning vocation schools, terrible maintenance of school buildings, lack of science equipment, and the lack of electives that taught black history, the committee felt very passionately about the tracking system and the high rate of school drop outs. Acknowledging that there were ways in which tracking could be beneficial to the administration, the report shed light on how such a system was also problematic. “The track system may be convenient for administrators and teachers, since it groups students by level of reading. But it also rigidly segregates students within a school. Most students in the Basic track

²⁹ “BUILD Black Paper One: The Buffalo Public Schools,” April 1967.

³⁰ Ibid.

are Negroes and most students in the Regents track are white.”³¹ In more ways than one, schools were microcosms that reflected larger society and in doing so, they were perpetuating the social inequalities that black residents wished to ameliorate. Therefore, tracking needed to be abolished.

Identifying Solutions

Within the same report that BUILD outlined school failures, the education committee also developed several radical recommendations. Perhaps the most interesting recommendation was the proposed alternative to the tracking system: “Dump the track system. Replace it with a greatly expanded program of compensatory education, with heavy emphasis on non-graded sections where students can work in small sections at their own pace. Add tutorial programs and challenging field trips and materials that use genuine community issues and NEGRO history. Use testing to diagnose students rather than classify them.”³² BUILD’s proposal appeared to be in direct contrast to the traditional model of education where lecturing, tests, and grades were heavily relied upon in “educating” and assessing a pupil. This alternative is arguably a more humanizing approach to education. In a compensatory education model with field trips and black history, there would be more opportunity for student’s individual learning styles to be embraced in the classroom and for students to find greater relevance in the work that they would be expected to produce. Black Paper Number One outlined a plan that could potentially result in higher educational attainment for black and white students throughout Buffalo Public School system.

Eliminating the tracking system was only the first step toward more equitable education in Buffalo. Another radical recommendation outlined by BUILD was for schools to reconstruct

³¹ “BUILD Black Paper One: The Buffalo Public Schools,” April 1967.

³² Ibid.

their curriculums. “The curriculum must have as its objective, meeting the child where he is and following him through a careful sequence so that he is genuinely LURED to higher levels of achievement.”³³ Again, BUILD’s proposal is suggesting ways to engage each individual child in the classroom so that they have a greater sense of connection to their education. However, schools could not stop at effectively engaging the student. If schools were to be successful, there also needed to be positive relations fostered between the schools and the communities in which they were situated. To achieve this goal, BUILD recommended the readjustment of the current school structure so that schools would be more community friendly. “Schools must be seen as COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, without walls of alienation cutting off the community. Parents must be heavily involved in the basic decision making processes of the schools.”³⁴ For many schools, parents were not integrated into the educative process. BUILD’s suggestion that schools stop alienating parents and instead partner with them, could maximize their impact in the community. Other ways of fostering a positive relationship with the community would be through developing first class libraries at each school that would be open to the public and by feeding and clothing needy students. While it is the guardian's responsibility to feed and cloth the students, BUILD asserted that it should be the school’s responsibility to meet that need when the parents are unable. This organization placed emphasis on the student as a human being and understood that it was unreasonable to expect students to focus on school work with growling stomachs and tattered clothes, especially in a city that experienced such brutally cold winters. BUILD was not suggesting that the following measures be taken instead of integrating the schools. This point was made clear in their expectations of the Board of Education that, “the administration must stand firm on integration. Money must be found to integrate schools at the same time that the

³³ “BUILD Black Paper One: The Buffalo Public Schools,” April 1967.

³⁴ Ibid.

general quality of education is raised throughout the system.”³⁵ The city could simultaneously work on school integration while enhancing the quality of education in black schools.

BUILD Academy Opens

Rather than wait on city officials to improve the educational system and adhere to the recommendations made, the BUILD organization mobilized the black community to create their own school. On September 3rd, 1969, BUILD Academy opened its doors. The school was comprised of 400 students, 16 teachers, and 20 aides.³⁶ Desiring to stay true to the goal of community participation, BUILD allowed community members to have a voice in the operation of the school. In a partnership with The State Teachers College, the Board of Education and BUILD, five members from each group served as members of the policy board. The duty of the policy board was to handle administrative tasks that would usually be the sole responsibility of the Board of Education. Once it came time for hiring decisions, more members of BUILD were on the personnel committee than members from the Board of Education or the Teachers College. Therefore, the community had a larger role in selecting the faculty that would be guiding their children’s learning. This was the kind of community involvement that BUILD wished to see at more schools in the future. At the bottom of the education section of BUILD’s third annual report, there is a slogan which reads: “The BUILD Academy Today: Community Control of All Our Schools Tomorrow!”³⁷ BUILD Academy was to be the trial grounds for revolutionizing education in the Buffalo area overall. If the BUILD model was successful, then the school could be used as a template for what should be replicated in other areas of the city. A vision for change

³⁵ “BUILD Black Paper One: The Buffalo Public Schools,” April 1967.

³⁶ BUILD, “Third Annual Report,” 1969, The BUILD Files, William A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies, 2.

³⁷ BUILD, “Third Annual Report,” 2.

lay not only in the physical upkeep of school buildings, but in a total overhaul of the curriculum and the traditional ways that students were being taught.

Education at BUILD Academy was largely personalized and student driven. As stated in two of the goals for the academy, the purpose of this kind of learning was to facilitate greater intellectual development and positive self image. This goal was met by providing a combination of teacher and student directed classroom time. Classrooms contained learning centers where students could engage in guided activities whenever they felt the need to do so. Some of the themed learning centers were for books, writing resources, viewing film, listening to audio, arts, games, science, and math. These centers were in place to allow children to practice self expression while also learning grade appropriate material. It was believed that students would achieve greater academic performance if they were allowed to exercise agency in the classroom, had interest in what they were learning, and were allowed to learn at their own pace. Learning centers helped students have structured individual and group learning time, as well as create an environment that was responsive to the unique needs of any given child.³⁸

Impressions on the Community

In October of 2016, I had the opportunity to speak to former students of BUILD Academy about the school's significance. Willie A. Price, Kevin Wright and Pam Roach, were all enrolled as students at the Academy within the first ten years of its founding. In 1970, Price joined the Academy as a third grade student and remained until his sixth grade graduation in 1974. Wright began his journey at BUILD Academy as a pre-kindergarten student in 1968 and graduated from the 6th grade around 1974. Finally, Roach attended the academy from first grade until sixth grade, between 1970 and 1977. As expected, the responses revealed that the school's

³⁸ "BUILD Academy Progress Report," 1971, The BUILD Files, William A. Miles Center for African and African-American Studies, 17.

emphasis on black pride and fostering an engaging learning environment were the most appreciated aspects of a BUILD education. Once they joined the school, regardless of how soon or how late, all individuals stayed until the sixth grade and enjoyed a unique learning experience.

Willie A. Price, who is now a self published author and motivational speaker, provided some of the most detailed reflections on his time spent at BUILD. More specifically, Price recalls the teaching styles: “the way the teachers taught, it wasn’t just teaching from a curriculum...it was like you experiencing a lot of the things that they taught.”³⁹ Price’s most vivid memories of this kind of learning were of his time spent in history class with a teacher’s aid from Guyana. Price remarks, “We would taste food and see clothes and different videos and different things of that country. So, it really enlightened us to things and to people and to cultures that we would’ve never been aware of if we were at another school, and that was one of the great things about BUILD Academy.”⁴⁰ BUILD went the extra mile to not only educate students about their own context, but the academy wanted students to have exposure to aspects of the broader world. The kind of exposure that came not just through textbooks, but through playing the games that children in other cultures played, seeing different cultural clothing, and tasting food like octopus, squid, and cannolis.

As promised in its commitment to stronger learning environments, BUILD Academy not only exposed students to cultures outside of their own, students were taught black history as well. Kevin Wright, who later went on to become a pastor and clinical therapist, spent the formative years of his life at BUILD. Wright remembers black history being emphasize through the following means: “advertisements of bulletin boards or special video screens of different

³⁹ Willie A. Price (former BUILD student) interview by Domonique Griffin, October 24, 2016.

⁴⁰ Price, 2016.

events in American history where African Americans had influence.”⁴¹ Wright remembers Afrocentrism being in the forefront of education during a time that he believes was critical in Buffalo’s history. Wright explains, “The city may have been very segregated at the time and to have a community school that really invested in that group of folks, primarily that ethnic group of Black folks, they really carried that banner of emphasizing our uniqueness in being Black and giftedness of who you are and there’s nothing wrong with who you are because of your skin color.”⁴² Emphasis on Black pride and self pride was also reiterated as a significant theme in my interview with Pam Roach.

Roach, like Wright, spent the first half of her childhood at BUILD Academy. When questioned about what made the school so unique at the time, Roach recalled, “Black history. We knew who we were, we knew we were valued as people, and there was an expectation that we were gonna make a contribution to society in some way shape or form, like those who came before us. So we carried that responsibility everywhere.”⁴³ Having constant reminders of their significance in society was invaluable to Black students who would not have the same amount of support from larger society, or even other schools. In reflecting on time spent at other schools, former students were thankful that they had such a positive foundation at BUILD Academy. Roach summarizes the main difference between the treatment of students at BUILD and the treatment she received elsewhere: “At white schools, we were just another Black student... teachers don’t understand you, they just know they’re legally obligated to teach you. But they weren’t teaching Black history. They were just teaching history. There was nothing good about us in that.”⁴⁴ Unlike at BUILD, other schools did not reflect or value the experiences of Black

⁴¹ Kevin Wright (former BUILD student) interview by Domonique Griffin, October 19, 2016.

⁴² Wright, 2016.

⁴³ Pam Roach (former BUILD student) interview by Domonique Griffin, October 27, 2016.

⁴⁴ Roach, 2016

children in the curriculum. Regardless of any other goal that the BUILD organization may have had, the testimonials of these former students indicate that BUILD Academy had a degree of individual impact. An impact that lasted beyond the students' time within the walls of a school building.

Conclusion

On the surface, it may appear that BUILD Academy was solely the result of community protests in response to School #48 releasing a black teacher from the school. Having analyzed the social conditions in Buffalo around the same period that School #48 upset the community, it is clear that there were many forces that influenced the creation of BUILD Academy. The BUILD organization was aware of growing frustration and activism within Buffalo's black community, and utilized the frustration of black parents in order to achieve one of their own goals. Parents who were willing to protest the discriminatory practices and unjust conditions at one school, provided BUILD with the opportunity to materialize some of the recommendations that had been outlined a year earlier in the BUILD Black Paper Number One report. This report largely influenced the creation and goals of BUILD Academy, but the report itself was influenced by broader social conditions. BUILD's report elucidated the ways in which a segregated school system was perpetuating a crumbling community forced into segregated housing and being denied access to jobs. Thus, BUILD arrived in a charged historical moment when it could disrupt a cycle of miseducation. Strengthening the black community did not just mean creating a new school, but changing preconceived notions of how black children should learn. Rather than forcing students to memorize abstract material that had no relevance to their lived experiences, BUILD Academy sought to make education relatable. Students who attended BUILD Academy were able to see themselves in the curriculum through the teaching of black history and

encouraging messages of self pride. As Buffalo is facing similar issues today of residential segregation, school segregation, high unemployment rates and school failure, community members and educators might be able to further the vision of BUILD Academy and construct a better educational future for the city's black children.