

The Milwaukee MUSIC Protests:
The Path to Milwaukee's
Desegregation

Jocelyn Dollevoet

Junior Division

Research Paper

Word Count: 1556

Thesis

The MUSIC Civil Rights protests resulted in the integration of Milwaukee's public schools, as well as the end of intact busing in the area. These protests contributed to the city of Milwaukee becoming considerably less racially segregated and ultimately helped to change the city for the better.

MUSIC

On March 1, 1964, an African-American attorney from Tennessee founded the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, better known as MUSIC. The founder, Lloyd Barbee, created the group with the goal of desegregating the public schools of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This group involved many well-known civil rights activists, including Marilyn Morheuser, Rev. William J. Miles, Father James Groppi, and Calvin Sherard. The committee was also an umbrella organization, as it consisted of multiple smaller groups.

Intact Busing

One of the most daunting issues that MUSIC focused on was intact busing. Intact busing was a system that strengthened segregation by keeping children of different races separated from one another during the school day. Intact busing was a policy that involved

students being transported to different schools during the day in an effort to avoid overcrowding in public schools.¹

In the morning, students would board a bus to their regular schools. After checking in for attendance, they then boarded the buses to their assigned schools, where they would spend most of their day. They spent the morning and afternoon in classrooms with other students of the same race. The students traveled back to their regular schools at lunch and at the end of the day to prevent the different colored students from coming into contact with one another. The overwhelming majority of students that were intact bused were colored, although a large number of whites had used this system as well.

In theory, the policy sounded as though it might be helpful, but in execution, the process was difficult and created no small amount of unnecessary tension and stress.

MUSIC was strongly against intact busing, as they believed that it created and fostered segregation. The members of the group believed that the Milwaukee school board practiced intact busing with the intent of maintaining segregation among its schools.

Freedom Schools

In response to the growing issue of intact busing and the school board's insistence to keep schools segregated, MUSIC hosted a number of massive school boycotts known as freedom day schools, more simply as freedom schools. During these boycotts, volunteers taught lessons

¹ "Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC)." *UWM March on Milwaukee*, UW Milwaukee Library Team

on African-American history, justice, and freedom. The freedom schools were held in public buildings such as churches and community centers. The freedom day schools were offered for students to attend during the school boycotts. The locations and dates of the schools were advertised on brightly colored signs that were scattered across the city.²

The first freedom day school was held on May 18, 1964. Approximately 8,500 students attended on this date, and nearly 11,000 children stayed out of their normal schools for the day. There were three freedom schools held in total. The second one was held in 1965, and the final freedom school was held in 1966. Attendance decreased immensely as the freedom schools continued, but there were still many students in attendance on every date.

Although the school boycotts were relatively successful, they still seemed to have little effect on the school board. The board continued to practice the policy of intact busing, leading the members of MUSIC to try a more direct approach. A few of their newer tactics included sit-ins, chain-ins, sing-ins, picketing, and additional boycotts.

The group would often sit in at school board meetings silently, then sing a civil rights song as they exited the building. *We Shall Overcome* was one of the most popular civil rights songs sung by the group.

Arrests

On May 24, 1965, nine members of MUSIC, including Lloyd Barbee, formed a human chain and blocked a school bus from leaving in an effort to protest intact busing. Around 20 more members gathered on the sidewalk in a picket line, carrying signs. Even after a police

² "Freedom Day School Poster." *Milwaukee United School Integration Committee*, 05-18-1964

officer demanded that the demonstrators move, they still remained standing in front of the bus. After refusing to move out of the way, the protesters blocking the bus were arrested and placed into a police wagon.

During this time, Lloyd Barbee stated in a prepared speech, “Let this MUSIC demonstration be a warning to the city that we will continue picketing, sit-ins, lay-ins, chain-ins and any other kind of “ins” until the intransigent school board caves in.”³

After the nine members were hauled into the wagon, two women from the picket line on the sidewalks left and sat in front of the second bus. After they, too, refused to move, they were also arrested. Six more protesters from the picket line sat down behind the third bus in line but were not arrested.

After their arrests, the eleven MUSIC members were taken to the police station and questioned. While a member of the group was being questioned, the other members stood outside of the door, quietly singing *We Shall Overcome* and other civil rights songs.

Those arrested were expected to pay a \$10 to \$20 fine for a first-time offense and were then released from custody.

After the arrests, MUSIC continued to stage protests and boycotts, determined not to give up until the school board changed their ways. Unfortunately, the board was just as unrelenting as they were and seemed to be rather indifferent towards MUSIC’s efforts.

The final major MUSIC demonstration occurred in December of 1965. During this time, the group members traveled to the building site of the MacDowell elementary school on a daily

³ “11 Demonstrators Seized for Blocking School Buses.” *Milwaukee Journal*, 24 May 1965

basis, protesting the school's construction. The members of MUSIC were strongly against the school's construction, as they knew it would serve as yet another segregated facility. To protest, some members of the group held vigils, while others even went so far as to chain themselves to the fences and construction equipment in an effort to prevent the construction workers from building the school. The school board ordered the workers to continue building the school regardless of the demonstrations, angering the protestors. Once the school was completed and opened, in January of 1967, members of MUSIC passed out fliers and spread the word that the school was unsafe, unplanned, and a place for overcrowded, segregated education.⁴

Lawsuit/Court Case

Between May and June of 1965, Lloyd Barbee, Marilyn Morheueser, and a few other members of MUSIC began to gather and assemble evidence of intentional segregation in Milwaukee's public school system. On June 19, 1965, Lloyd Barbee filed a federal lawsuit against the school board of the city, claiming that they were purposely fostering segregation in the public schools of Milwaukee.

While the board never outright denied that the schools were segregated, they still insisted that the city's housing patterns were to blame, and not their own actions. They believed that the neighborhood school policy was actually helping with the issue instead of making it worse.

Barbee countered their argument by explaining that the policy was actually quite destructive, and led to much of the racial segregation in the school system. Barbee pointed out

⁴ "MacDowell School Construction, Protest." *UWM March on Milwaukee*, UW Milwaukee Library Team

that the board's support of the policy seemed to be helping maintain the segregation, leading to the conclusion that the segregation within the schools was intentional.

To aid their case, he and Marilyn presented the statistics and documents that they had gathered, helping to prove that the school board to be maintaining segregation. Through extensive research, they and the others compiled class data, photos, and censuses dating back to the 1950s. The documents and findings revealed that the board's policies and actions had indeed caused the segregation within the public schools.

On January 19, 1976, almost ten years later, Judge John Reynolds finally ruled that segregation existed in the Milwaukee public schools and that the school board and their policies were the sources behind it. In response, he ordered that the two parties develop a plan to desegregate the schools.⁵

Unfortunately, the school board refused and insisted on taking the case to a higher court. The original findings were reaffirmed time and time again until the board and MUSIC eventually reached an agreement, and a consent decree was issued between the two. The two groups agreed on a compromise to lessen the policies that were proved to cause segregation, which contributed to the end of intact busing and desegregation in the city.

The End of Intact Busing

⁵ “[Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee et al.] Decision and Order (Including Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law)”, *District Court, Milwaukee, WI. Eastern District of Wisconsin*

The MUSIC protests led to not only an increase in desegregation but also the end of intact busing in the Milwaukee area. In September of 1971, the intact busing policy ended, though it was well after the MUSIC protests were over.

Despite this, it was apparent that the organization's protests were one of the main influences to the new change, as MUSIC was one of the first groups to originally protest the policy. Additionally, the school board's election of its first colored president, Harold B. Jackson Junior, occurred as a result of the lessened bias and segregation. With the policy removed, many of the city's public schools saw a tremendous decrease in segregation and things began to look up for the city of Milwaukee. The end of intact busing sparked hope in the colored citizens of Milwaukee and helped pave the way to a brighter future for all.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

“11 Demonstrators Seized for Blocking School Buses.” *Milwaukee Journal*, 24 May 1965

This newspaper article covered the arrests of some of the members of MUSIC after staging a chain-in in front of a school bus in Milwaukee. This helped me gain more information about the law enforcement and the public’s reaction to these civil rights protests, as well as Lloyd Barbee’s quote and the information about the fines.

“Freedom Day School Poster.” Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, 05-18-1964,
Found 1-5-18

<http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/203/>

This poster and it’s summary helped me to gain a greater understanding of how the word was spread about the freedom schools. I learned the attendance statistics from this source as well, and incorporated them into my paper

“Milwaukee Ends ‘Intact’ Bus Plan.” *The New York Times*, 09-2-1971, Found 1-5-18

<http://www.nytimes.com/1971/09/05/archives/milwaukee-ends-intact-bus-plan-integrates-visiting-classes-into.html>

This newspaper article explained when and how the intact busing policy ended. Through it, I learned that the end of intact busing was tied into the MUSIC protests, in addition to the election of the first black president to the school board.

“MUSIC Records, Box 1, Folder 2, Curricula and Lessons for Freedom School”, Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, 1965-1966, Found 12-21-17

<http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/290/rec/2>

This document showed the classes and topics that were taught during the first freedom day school. I learned from this document that much of the curriculum taught at the freedom schools involved black history, freedoms, and civil rights.

“Oral History Interview with Rev. William J. Miles, March 18, 1994, part I.” *University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*, Marc J. Rodriguez, 03-18-1994, Found 1-10-18

<http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/march/id/1570/rec/6>

This interview provided me with additional information about the Freedom Schools, as well as showed me the perspective of a member of MUSIC. Overall, I found it to be very helpful in gaining an additional understanding of the Freedom Schools and the MUSIC group as a whole.

“[Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee et al.] Decision and Order (Including Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law)”, *District Court, Milwaukee, WI. Eastern District of Wisconsin*, Found 3-24-18

https://archive.org/stream/ERIC_ED131178#page/n0/mode/2up

This document allowed me to better understand the court case's results along with the case as a whole. Overall, this source proved to be valuable in my research

Secondary Sources

“Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee, 408 F. Supp. 765 (1976).”

UWM March on Milwaukee, UW Milwaukee Library Team, Found 11-17-17

<http://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/amos-et-al-v-board-of-school-dir/>

This article provided me with most of the background knowledge about the court case. I learned the date that the lawsuit was filed, the people involved, and the motives behind the federal lawsuit.

“Lloyd A. Barbee (1925-2002).” *BlackPast.org*, Daphne Barbee-Wooten, Found 1-8-18

<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/lloyd-barbee-1925-2002>

From this source, I learned Lloyd Barbee's date of birth and background. Part of his background that I learned included where he was born, which I included in my research paper.

“MacDowell School Construction, Protest.” *UWM March on Milwaukee*, UW Milwaukee Library Team, Found 11-18-17

<http://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/macdowell-school/>

/From this article, I learned about MUSIC's final major protest, the construction of MacDowell Elementary school. The article was very interesting, and provided insights and information on MUSIC's motives against the school being built.

“March on Milwaukee Timeline.” *UWM March on Milwaukee*, UW Milwaukee Library Team, Found 11-17-17

<http://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/timeline/>

This timeline was an incredibly important source, as it showed the events and dates of many of MUSIC's important actions against the school board. I used this timeline to check many of the dates in the research paper, and most of the large events.

“Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC).” *UWM March on Milwaukee*, UW Milwaukee Library Team, Found 11-12-17

<http://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/music>

This article provided me with much of the basic background information of the group. Through this source, I learned about the members of MUSIC, the goals of the group, and information on the group's boycotts.

“Wis. Plan To End Milwaukee Busing Advances.” *Education Week*, Kerry A. White, 06-16-1999, Found 11-17-17

<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=c21b3f3d-059d-4bf1-948f-18cace33d138%40sessionmgr120&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkImN1c3RpZD1zNzMyNDk2NCZzaXRlPWVob3N0LWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=2011496&db=f5h>

This article helped me to understand the long term results of the MUSIC protests. I learned that after the court case, the practice of intact busing in Milwaukee's public schools became rare, resulting in the schools becoming less segregated as well.