

Reflections on 50 years

Q&A: A first person perspective on launching METCO

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Opinions Editor

My grandmother, Katherine Butler Jones, was instrumental in starting the METCO program. 50 years after METCO began, she explains the process of starting the program dedicated to integrating schools in and around Boston.

How did the idea of starting the METCO program first come about?

The idea for the METCO program evolved from some of the issues of discrimination in the South, where children were educated in separate schools, and people were saying that this shouldn't be the way things are. In the North, the schools were segregated [too]. Black children were going to separate schools and white children were going to separate schools. So I think that those are two important things.

The other thing was the schools in Boston were disasters. They were not providing a good education for the children especially in the schools that were segregated. It was a time of crisis in the country around education for black children, and it was difficult for people to have their children sent to another school in another district. The beginning of the move to desegregate the schools and the beginning of the METCO program was because the Boston school system was not willing to have children of color go to predominantly white schools. Out of this situation and out of the fact that there was some attempt on the part of black parents to try and desegregate schools in the south, to provide a better education for their children, there was a group of people, led by the superintendent of schools in Brookline, who said to each other if we have space in our school system for children to come in from Boston, why can't we come together, as different school committees and different superintendents, and see what our communities would say about this and how we could implement this possibility. Including me, a group of people got together and started thinking about how to go about this, how to get people of seven communities to talk about working with the Boston community to make it possible.

Who were the biggest supporters of METCO?

The key person from the Boston school area was Ruth

Batson, an NAACP official, and she was able to get the [education committee of the] NAACP to think this was a good idea. There was money available from the federal government. That was an important piece too, because people were saying: "how are you going to pay for this?"

Representatives from the Fair Housing and Equal Rights committee from a lot of the communities were on the executive committee of METCO. The principals came together and met before the program started. The Secretary of State of Massachusetts, people from religious organizations in Boston, and ten people that started working on this project on getting children to come to suburban public schools.

What was your role in the process?

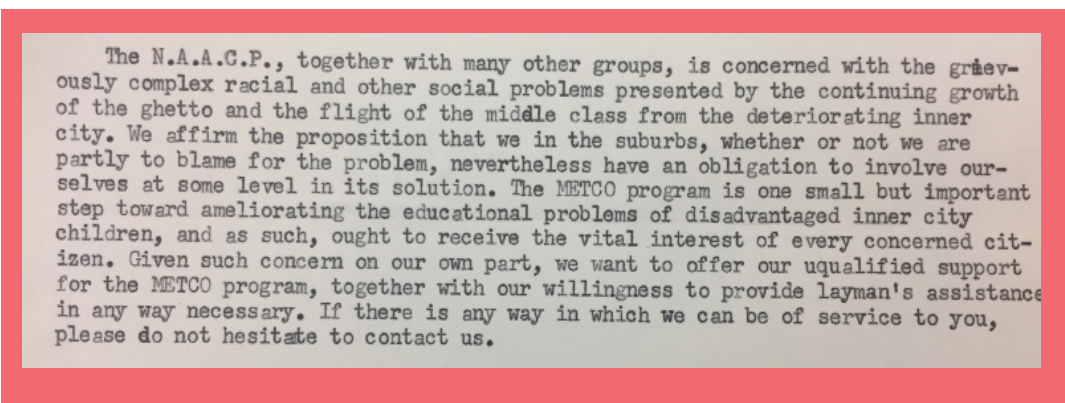
I had started a freedom school a couple of years before, which was an exchange with the two communities of Roxbury and Newton. The children came from Roxbury to Newton one month and the others came from Newton to Roxbury. We planned programs — taking them to different places that they would not normally go to and see, and that established a base for people who were concerned with, and interested in, integrating education. The freedom schools were a precursor to METCO. The freedom schools were kind of a copy for what people had done in the South, learning black history in integrated settings.

I was part of the planning process for the program. We did training for the teachers and provided materials, list of books for the students to learn, setting up meetings with the teacher and students that were coming in, meeting with faculty to talk about METCO students. When I look at my notes in what happened, it was like a full time job. Every day you were working on making this program a successful endeavor. After the METCO program began, I became an administrator for it for 4 years. I then ran for school committee in Newton, and I was the first black person elected to the school committee, and I defeated a white male incumbent. That started my eight years on the school committee, which has eight people, one from each district of the city. The school committee has a lot of power to shape what's going on in the schools. I felt very good about

Q: What resonates with you the most about METCO's 50th anniversary?

A: "When I think that the program started in 1966, I think about the images we see [from that year], which often depict racial divisiveness, violence, and people fighting to keep cultural groups separate. This program is one that started by volunteers, [who wanted] to push integration forward and who felt that it was important that Brown vs. Board of Education be put in place as soon as possible. The idea that the program started at a time when Martin Luther King Jr. was still marching, that people were marching for integration and for rights [really puts it into perspective]. There were people from towns like Wellesley and communities in Boston that were proactive and actively pushing integration forward."

—Bill Craft, Wellesley METCO '87



A Wellesley preacher and N.A.A.C.P. member remained outspokenly in favor of the adoption of METCO.

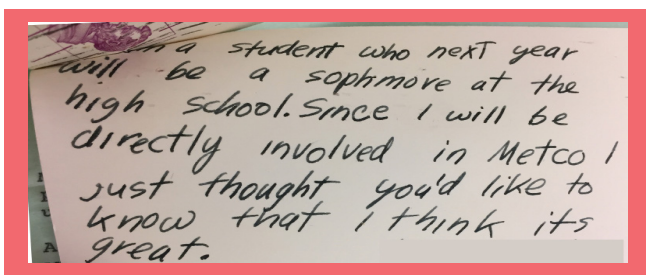


A: To be in the position that I'm in, to understand the historic relevance of the people who started this chair, and who who started this movement— Wellesley being one of the original twelve METCO territories— it's huge. It's a huge deal for me being part of that. I can only liken it to being maybe a member of a sports team that historically has won a championship and now you're the next draft class in line to win the Superbowl or something like that; I mean there's a lot of prestige behind it, there's a lot of honor, and there's a lot of courage that people who have sat here before me have exhibited."

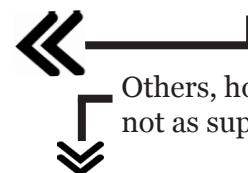
—Grant Hightower
METCO high school Coordinator

A: The fiftieth anniversary to me— it just shows how far education has come for inner-city kids in Boston... We are beating statistics pretty much. We come out to this place that has one of the top educations in the state, and we excel at it. 80% of kids in METCO graduate, which is amazing, and the fact that that's been going on for 50 years is just a plus; it's incredible.

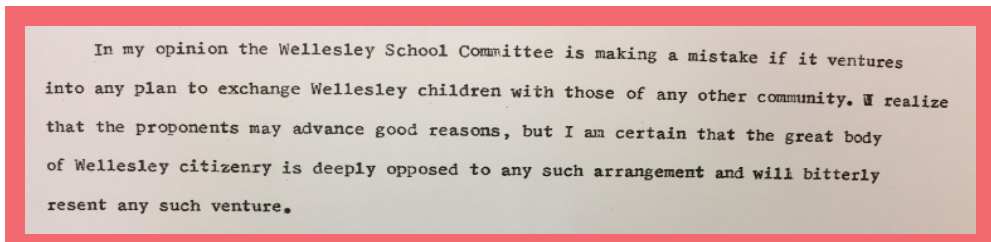
—Rashad Halidy '17



One sophomore sent a hand-written postcard to school committee praising the program.



Others, however, were not as supportive.



s of Wellesley METCO

May 16, 1966:
School Committee
approves METCO

VOTED: that this School Committee is prepared to participate in a program which would permit children not attending imbalanced schools in Boston to attend schools in suburban communities provided, that the cost of the attendance is not borne by the Town of Wellesley, that the pupils are placed in schools where classroom space is available, and that the School Committee of the City of Boston approves the program.

These letters from the METCO archives capture the range of sentiments of Wellesley residents in 1966 as the School Committee deliberated over the adoption of the program. Special thanks to Kalise Wornum for sharing the letters.

I commend the Wellesley High School for planning to admit negro children from Boston for the next school year. It is not necessary to favor involuntary bussing, redrawing of metropolitan school districts, or many other new educational and sociological theories in order to support this action. It is enough that there is a need for improving education for certain children in Boston, who seem often to be negroes, and Wellesley is willing to take a very small step to help.

A: “In some ways [looking forward at the next 50 years], I almost wish we wouldn’t need [METCO]. If the purpose of this was to eliminate racial isolation, my hope is that in 50 years, we won’t need to develop a program to do that, but we ourselves and our society has done that for us; we’re now more integrated; we’re now living amongst each other and have a more diverse community that we won’t need such a program.

—Kalise Wornum

Wellesley METCO k-12 director
Lexington METCO alumna

Q: What is the greatest part of METCO? Where is there room for improvement?

A: “A positive for Wellesley METCO is that I’m going to Wellesley High School, and I understand my privilege because there are only a few really good [Boston Public Schools], and I understand that the programs we have here are one we wouldn’t get in Boston Public Schools. The social aspect is the hardest part, being in METCO, and I feel like there still is a very big social divide between resident students and Boston students that I think can be addressed better beyond elementary school with the stay day program.

—Zimmie Obiora ’17

Being a good American and a reasonable and Christian woman I am very much in favor of efforts to raise the educational caliber of our fellow citizens. However, I am very much opposed to any plan which would raise the standard of some while lowering the standard of others who have reached a higher level. It is not fair to either party.

There’s much more where this came from! Read full length interviews with METCO alumni, directors, and coordinators, as well as continued coverage of the program and its events throughout the year at whsbradford.org.

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the work that was accomplished when I was on the school committee. I think we did good work making sure that the program advanced and that the school hired more black teachers, that kids had some role models. All of those kind of things I thought were important.

Can you describe the process of starting METCO? What were the biggest challenges?

A vote had to happen in each community in order for [the program] to begin. We worked immensely hard to put it together. So finally in 1966, it was voted and work was being done with parents. Everyone went through an application process and each of the people that applied was interviewed by the director of the program, Ruth Batson. There was an elementary and secondary education act that was passed that made it possible for kids of one community to go to another. The teachers had to be trained because they [didn’t] have any considerable experience working with black children. There needed to be black history taught in the schools. The parents from Boston had to be very much involved with what was going on. We had meetings with the teachers to talk about curriculum: ‘what more do we need to do’. Newton decided not to charge any tuition, which meant whatever money was available from the state was available for training programs. We [also] had to do all the things that you wouldn’t necessarily have to think about: late buses, make sure that people could be actively involved in the community. Each year, the school committee of each town has to vote that they would like to continue to participate in this program.

Who offered the biggest resistance? Why do you think these people didn’t support METCO?

Naturally there was opposition, and the Boston school committee didn’t want to do anything. The person who was the most vocal and most repulsive person on the school committee was Louise Day Hicks. She said under no circumstances would the school system do anything to make it possible for children from Boston to go to suburban schools. The main argument was that [people] have no responsibility for anything that wasn’t in their respective community. For children to come to another community was something that they didn’t want to see happen. However, what happened after the success of the program was that each year, more communities wanted to be a part of this. And that’s the only reason it’s been able to grow and expand.

Can you describe the first few years of the METCO program in Newton? What went well, what needed improvement?

I think that because it was innovative and kind of earth-shaking for this kind of thing to happen, people put all that they had into making sure that it would work, and so you had a lot of energy and collaboration. The host families who volunteered to do this were very sincere and dedicated to their role, and they did a lot more than having their students go to their house. There were ties between the families of the METCO students and the families of the Newton children. It was amazing, with the situation at this period of time in Boston, that this program got off the ground and is still operating. We [also] made curriculum changes made and a lot of field trips that expanded the horizons for the both the children from Newton and the people from Boston.

When you were growing up, did you experience a lack of diversity at your school? If so, how did this influence your approach to starting the METCO program?

I went to [Ethical Culture School], an all-black school, independent school, so I started my education in an all-black environment. Living in Harlem I had black role models. Having black role models was very, very important to my development. I saw people in all ranks of life: people who worked in service, people who were teachers. That’s important in terms of having a sense of knowing something about the community.

What more do you think we can do to increase diversity within all public schools?

It’s terrible that this program has had to continue for this long because Boston hasn’t been able to get its act together. It’s not fair for children to have to get up at 6:00 in the morning and go out and get on a bus and go out on another bus to be educated; that’s not right. One thing that has to happen is the confidence of parents in the Boston school system to improve because if people have an alternative, they’re going to choose that even if it means a lot of sacrifice on their part. I’m concerned that it’s been necessary to keep it going for this length of time because Boston hasn’t been doing what it’s needs to do to build a stronger education system for their children. But I’m glad that this program exists and it’s been helping these children for a number of years. That’s the kind of thing that makes you feel so good, the success of these students. Most of the kids go on to higher education and graduate work as well.