MS450_001

Interviewer: Bayor, Ronald H.
Interviewee: Crim, Alonzo
Interview date: 1987-07-08
Transcription date: 2014
Georgia Institute of Technology Archives, Ron Bayor Papers (MS450)

CRIM: Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

BAYOR: I think I mentioned to you, I spoke to Dr. [Lesser?] already. There's really a few things that came up there, and I was curious about your opinion on it. First of all, the Atlanta School Compromise of 1973. What was your opinion about that?

CRIM: Well, the compromise and all of those matters were determined prior to my coming. It was not so much that I had an opinion one way or the other, as much as having a responsibility to implement that program, and with myself being part of it. I really felt it to be a relatively mild requirement [01:00] as it relates to desegregation, because at that point, we had approximately 84% black and only about 16% white. The teacher shifting had already taken place. The only real requirements of the compromise was that we have a parity of administrators and that we implement a voluntary transfer program, so that those measures really were relatively mild in comparison to some of the requirements imposed upon other school systems.

BAYOR: Did you feel, when you took over in ’73, that it might have been too late to achieve any racial balance in the school system? (inaudible)

CRIM: We achieved, in my opinion, the optimum level [02:00] of desegregation. I think many observants would agree that, shortly following that, we moved not only from desegregation, but to several degrees of integration as to how effectively that the youngsters got along with one another. Many observers of desegregation stated that whenever you would reach the point of a 70/30 ratio that the whites would just arbitrarily leave. Well, in the several schools which we have, and notably the high school, our ratio is about 50/50, and we have been able to sustain those levels through most of the years.

BAYOR: Dr. Lesser, as a matter of fact, did talk about a racial tipping point. That was actually one of his main points that he was [03:00] addressing when he spoke to me. For example, he was saying that basically the neglect of the black students earlier in regard -- ’50 to ’54 -- in regard to curriculum and in regard to overcrowding made successful integration possible. There were so many black schools that were overcrowded (inaudible) that to alleviate this fully you ought to have [and then?] going beyond the racial tipping points in all the white majority schools,

and that would, in a sense -- desegregation would have been overwhelmed by the basic fact that [tipping points couldn't be filled?]. Do you feel at all that desegregation, in a sense, was doomed, based on how blacks had been treated in the system prior to '54, and also during (inaudible)?

CRIM: I attribute the major concerns [04:00] that we've had with desegregation as it relates to community attitudes, city after city, that we've seen where resegregation was not, in my opinion, attributable to physical plants or teachers or the like. Racism was just an overwhelming kind of -- had an overwhelming kind of impact on the country relative to the perceptions and attitudes of people. We're still trying to overcome those kinds of attitudes. It hasn't been easy, but we certainly have realized it. (inaudible) projects. Almost all of our [05:00] major cities in the United States now are majority minority. Almost every city would have a different set of circumstances. So it would be difficult to say that we could ascribe certain kinds of conditions to -- as being cause of (inaudible).

BAYOR: He was under the opinion that -- a quote from him: "I really believe we could have had an integrated school system if we took it slower."

CRIM: Well, I don't think history would -- or research --

would prove that to be a kind of... I don't think that more time would have [06:00] done anything but...

BAYOR: I guess his feeling -- well, obviously --

CRIM: I mean, I was not here, so I can't really speak to that. But in any case, Atlanta was in the court 25 years before '73, and I don't know how much longer that it could have waited, especially after 1954, Brown (inaudible). Atlanta would be just caught up in the wave of action throughout the country. Just couldn't stop that kind of thing.

BAYOR: You think there was no way of stopping the (inaudible) because of the (inaudible)?

CRIM: We had tried desperately. We had whites to go out to -- attempting to recruit other whites [07:00], knowing full well that we needed to build into that kind of program all the kind of trust factors that we could possibly put into such a program. And there was, just as I indicated, such a negative perception of the institution, which is majority [voter?].

BAYOR: Basically the racism (inaudible).

CRIM: Exactly.

BAYOR: Let me ask you this. What would you have done differently had you been here 10 years earlier? (inaudible) within white schools.

CRIM: I [wouldn't even?] conjecture on that. It is a human business. It's very difficult to say that -- you would have had to kind of play it by ear (inaudible). I just like to think that [08:00] I was very fortunate to have lived during this time, to have been a part of this kind of social change that would have (inaudible). We have a long way to go yet, but we certainly have accomplished just a tremendous amount in one generation.

BAYOR: I guess why I'm sort of moving along is really the work that was done here in the '60s was more of an impediment to really desegregating the schools. Whether there was any real commitment to doing that. I guess you --

CRIM: I would argue this. Again, as I said, growing up as I did, this generation, seeing all of those kinds of changes, I don't know that it would happen any differently. [09:00] I don't think it could have happened differently. It was one of those kinds of things which that idea whose time had come. Look at it now. People -- it's old news. People don't pay much attention to it anymore. Integration does not kindle that kind of emotional fervor that we felt in those days.

BAYOR: (inaudible)

CRIM: Well, in the courts, but you don't see people marching up and down, people who are willing to lose their lives and

give themselves in such a total way. I haven't seen that since the '60s.

BAYOR: It's already been done.

CRIM: Yes.

BAYOR: [Let me go to one of your questions?]. (inaudible) You said that white flight can be slowed [10:00] if we can clearly demonstrate excellence in our school program. Do you still (inaudible)?

CRIM: Yes indeed.

BAYOR: OK. Was there an effort to upgrade schools in racially transitional neighborhoods?

CRIM: There was an effort to raise standards and quality in all of those schools. And that is -- we did nothing really special in those schools, other than the fact that we started our magnet programs in those schools. But what we have done is that, systematically, we have established magnet programs in all of our [high schools?]. We like to think that every high school will think of itself as being number one at something.

BAYOR: The magnet schools were started [11:00] beginning with Northside. Was it started before you came in as superintendent --

CRIM: No.

BAYOR: Or was that started with you? That was one thing, I

guess, that could have been done earlier that might have been very helpful.

CRIM: Well, if it had gone that way, maybe at that time, it may have been perceived very differently. But it was -- Northside, of course, was just a natural with Billy Densmore and the performing arts. Then subsequently, it went to [North Bolton?] (inaudible) [Grady?], but beyond that, just expanded to [that equivalent?] on a [conquering?] basis.

BAYOR: The reason I ask is that, by the mid-’60s, Southwest High School was, I guess, going through a racial transition. (inaudible) And there was an organization called [Swap?] at that time [12:00] that was trying to maintain integrated community. And one of their points -- I spoke to [Jennifer Clayton?], who was active in that organization at the time, and she said that the perception was that the Board of Education was not interested in maintaining a high quality for that school, trying to keep the whites in, and in a sense they helped force the white -- they encouraged white flight by not upgrading the school to (inaudible) [the whites had wanted?]. That’s why I was curious about schools in transitional neighborhoods (inaudible).

CRIM: On my arrival, the people at Southwest High School,

their concern at that particular time was that they had a [serious instructional plan?]. Kids were climbing over one another there. Like I said, I was in town one [13:00] week and I had a Sunday meeting over there, lasting three to five hours. They were truly concerned about the quality of the program and were right there. But there was no hope of desegregating that particular school, because it had already become majority black.

BAYOR: But before that, apparently the whites had -- there was about a three-year period where the whites had stayed in the community.

CRIM: I really can't speak to that.

BAYOR: Yeah, I know (inaudible). I'm just saying, in terms of (inaudible), how to deal with transitional neighborhood schools.

CRIM: But again, my experience, large cities, despite the quality of magnet programs, on a residential [14:00] basis, people would still leave. Milwaukee is confronting that right now. You couldn't have a better magnet program than Milwaukee. They're, at this point, continuing to decline in white population in the city.

BAYOR: So it's a shame that no matter what was done, magnet or anything else, white flight is still going on.

CRIM: You have to deal with the attitudes [and guidance?].

You can’t (inaudible) those kinds of changes.

BAYOR: Do you start with this tipping point philosophy at all? That 70/30 (inaudible)?

CRIM: We have tried to go through a parity of 50/50. Thus far, we have done fairly well. When you consider that we have so few whites, [15:00] that’s a significant accomplishment.

BAYOR: I guess, again, ’60s were such a crucial decade to keep integrated school systems (inaudible).

CRIM: But you see this happening demographically. I guess that’s phase one. But as we begin to look at phase two, the move to the suburbs and (inaudible) of young black professionals, which could not have been -- which will provide, eventually, for a greater degree of natural desegregation on a residential basis, which is far more acceptable to most people. It could not have happened if we had not had the foundation stone of the ’60s and the dramatic changes [16:00] [in life which took place?].

BAYOR: What were your feelings on [court county or metro?] desegregation? (inaudible)

CRIM: What my -- and I hate to be cynical about it. But what I recommend, have long recommended, that education is the function of the state, and that we ought to consider desegregation as one of our top priorities, and we ought to

order school district boundaries on the basis of desegregation as one of the primary criteria for our organizing school district boundaries. What we have done historically is that we start with these cities, and we started with the cities. Then as the cities became desegregated, then we would [act?] say that [17:00] adjourning county, or that group, and so that it kind of grew on an osmotic basis, and therefore the effectiveness of desegregation was attenuated, because there were places that wanted to (inaudible). And if we had really been serious and said, hey, this is the law, the line, and if we were really going to look at desegregation and school district boundaries are not (inaudible), and that we're going to redraw them just as we do congressional boundaries and the like, every 10 years or so, school district boundaries, in that manner, we perhaps could have contained some of the (inaudible).

BAYOR: I think so, too.

CRIM: But Atlanta, [18:00] for the most part, bore the burden of desegregation alone for most of its years. The counties were all (inaudible).

BAYOR: Well, there was a suit in [ACLU?] that they're going to...

CRIM: Yeah, but...

BAYOR: I guess never got (inaudible).

CRIM: Yeah. Philanthropy, I mean, not only money, but in most [language and like?]. The thing that -- I still saw it coming out of the -- I thought to be extremely positive, though. I hear so few people speak to it. There was a kind of psychological freedom for kids in the system, despite the fact they were desegregated, in the sense that the entire city was, for the first time, open to them, relatively. Whatever resources which [19:00] were there. In the long term, that's not enough. But initially, there was some degree of exultation, that I can go anywhere in the city and utilize the resources which are available.

BAYOR: (inaudible)

CRIM: All I can say is, coming here as an experience administrator, I expressed [commendation?] of professional skills of my predecessor relative to the school finances and (inaudible) of the school plan, equipment and supplies and the like. This school system is -- at least the one which I inherited -- was not an impoverished school system, [20:00] and great effort was being made to improve the instructional program. But there again is part of the price you pay for social change. All of the energy of the school system was given to the litigation. My major task in my tenure has been to switch that from that perspective

to focusing on the instructional needs of the students. I've had many civil rights folks come to me and say, "Hey, you're responsible for the next phase of desegregation." And I've always responded, "That's your job." My job is the stewardship to these kids who are here right now, and [21:00] I can't do both of those things well. And it's that kind of paradox and dilemma that you're always confronting because of the expectations that people would have relative to the social change. It's that kind of regular kind of stewardship that I guess gets caught up in all of those kinds of problems and concerns, and somehow that you have to maintain that kind of vision of what is your job.

BAYOR: It's your job the school (inaudible) and I can understand that. In relation to that, what you just said, do you think the desegregation battle, and the time and effort spent on maintaining segregation in the '60s, had an effect on the quality of the school system here in Atlanta? (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) [22:00] [Think there's a turn?] from improving quality to resisting integration?

CRIM: Well, let me react to that a little bit. First of all, because of the '60s, and especially in school desegregation, which was the core, or the hub of the social changes which took place in this country, we became a

better democracy. It's almost like a second time. Maybe for the first time, we could say that we became a democratic republic. Women voted, blacks voted. Everybody could kind of participate. In the last 25 years or so, we are really beginning to build [23:00] this nation on a fully democratic basis. That was worth the pain and the suffering which we underwent at that point in the '60s and '70s. As I (inaudible) tell students in the school system, that virtue of my being here, that my reality [precedes my dreams?]. There is no (inaudible) of my (inaudible) that I even think of myself as being superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools. But at the same time, that kind of reality is now accessible to all of our kids, and that's a new reality for the United States, and I'm proud. [24:00] I just feel such a marvelous development, and I've seen that in my lifetime. I've just recently returned from Eastern Europe, and when they talk about democratizing some of the social states, you could see the drama and the differences. And we've achieved a great deal in our nation, but at the same time, when we look at the world's economy and technology, which our institution represents and the like, we've got lots to do.

BAYOR: Oh, yeah.

CRIM: And it's -- but we would be in a very difficult state

if, in confronting those [25:00] new kinds of problems of the 21st century, if we had not had the ’60s. We couldn’t do it.

BAYOR: But we were in bad shape before then as far as not --

CRIM: Not, but being in the period of manufacturing and industrialization and the like, we need -- almost needed the kind of social order which we had. Somebody had to do the dirty stuff. But (inaudible) we can’t afford that kind of social system.

BAYOR: Well, I think even a lot of white conservatives in the South (inaudible) plan to give it up.

CRIM: The South is a very different kind of place. Despite all this (inaudible). I frequently tell my friends in the North that I come up South. Because it’s far more subtle and (inaudible). [26:00] And again, Atlanta particular. It is -- when they say that this is a place that works, that’s really true.

BAYOR: (inaudible)

CRIM: Exactly, and I was born and raised here. When you go to the community saying that your kids are in need -- this past year, for instance, we dedicated [a mill?] for the purpose of introducing technology into our school system (inaudible) business communities. Rather than saying, “Hey, those kids don’t need anything.” It’s a very

different kind of thing.

BAYOR: But nonetheless -- I agree with all you said, the revolution had to take place to change. But nonetheless, a lot of the resources of the school system back in the ’60s did go into litigation, [27:00] did go into fighting desegregation battle.

CRIM: Oh, without a doubt. I guess the most expensive facet of that is the energy and the thoughts of people, they were consumed by the litigation.

BAYOR: Which had to hurt the school system.

CRIM: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

BAYOR: Did you have any indication when you came into the superintendent’s job that there had been an effort in the ’60s or early ’70s to push blacks into vocational courses or (inaudible) curriculum of the black students?

CRIM: I saw some evidence of that. [I missed that whole?] (inaudible). I didn’t see that, per se, relative to the school system itself, but I had a number of people tell me that that had taken place. [28:00] Certainly, I heard a great deal of it relative to the differences in the way blacks were treated as opposed to whites, relative to promotional opportunities and so forth.

BAYOR: Did you make an effort, or was there need to make an effort, to upgrade the curriculum in the majority black

schools that you took over?

CRIM: The curriculum was unified in the school system.

BAYOR: So in other words, I guess, (inaudible) the curriculum had.

CRIM: It was a (inaudible) instruction course.

BAYOR: So in other words, in terms of pushing blacks into vocational classes or downgrading their curriculum, you're talking about really the 1950s (inaudible)?

CRIM: I really can't speak to that, but yeah. We had a uniform curriculum, and [he?] was really a very strong instructional course.

BAYOR: How about --

CRIM: [29:00] [I shouldn't have said he?].

BAYOR: -- the impact of some of the other techniques you used? Pairing, rezoning schools, (inaudible).

CRIM: Again, we had so few. We had three pairing situations, all of which suffered from the lack of [people?] populations, and just -- they were never as effective as we would want them to be.

BAYOR: Did you find pairing at that point also, like the white flight, the majority white and the majority blacks [were paired?]?

CRIM: I don't think that those were causal factors. People thought that -- again, they felt that they weren't getting

their full share of instructional support [30:00] and the like. People populations were so small. We had fewer teachers. Therefore, they had more mixed-grade classes and things like that.

BAYOR: How about the closing of some schools?

CRIM: That was brutal. During my tenure, we closed 52 schools, and I importantly stated I was six-feet-two then. (inaudible) That, again, was an imperative at the time. Thank God for getting (inaudible).

BAYOR: (inaudible)

CRIM: People populations.

BAYOR: Were they [going through their own places?] initially, do you think?

CRIM: I think, like anything, they were building the right places for the populations which existed at [31:00] that time. For whatever reason, people think that schools should last forever, and that, I think, is the misperception, is that we need those schools for about 25 or 30 years and then tear them down, and things change.

BAYOR: The reason I ask that, because I've spoken with [Clarence Colburn?] and he had said that, right after the '54 decision, there was a very big effort by the whites in town, Board of Education, to grow to get schools for blacks when the blacks began moving in the direction of the white

schools. In other words, to avoid integration of so-called Supreme Court schools all over the place. Those are the schools that apparently became unneeded later on.

CRIM: That's not quite the case. The schools which we closed first were located primarily in predominantly white communities. [32:00] Just the whites (inaudible), and we closed them. Including -- in the [internal side?], for instance, we only had three high schools: Northside, North Fulton, and Grady. We closed everything else. It was -- now, the population remained level in the southwest section of the city. That continued to grow. But blacks (inaudible) in that regard during the last decade by having fewer children, especially those whose incomes increased, over time, their populations began to decline. [33:00] And then when we started going in closing those schools, then it's perceived that they were being maltreated because we had already closed the schools that were on the north sections of the city.

BAYOR: I guess there, it was product product white flight, too.

CRIM: This was white flight over here; over here, it was really the result of just lower birth rates.

BAYOR: They'd be zoning schools like Grady, then, and some of the other ones, that was never meant to bring blacks and

whites together in the various remaining schools?

CRIM: Well, actually, it was not so much the rezoning. The zone lines have remained fairly, relatively the same. But rather that -- and the desegregation took place on the voluntary transfer basis. There weren't significant zone changes. Zone changes were only made in order to [34:00] enlarge the catchment area, because we had fewer students.

BAYOR: But it's also geographic zoning not based on racial [target?].

CRIM: That's right.

BAYOR: That's the difference.

CRIM: Yeah. So when we changed -- when we closed (inaudible) that expanded on Grady's side, zone.

BAYOR: I guess my feeling, going back to the '60s, is that had been -- the redrawing of geographic zones was not based on race, and that the magnet schools (inaudible) rather than this [grade a year planning thing?] they played around for a while, I think you might have seen some white flight anyway, but I think you would have seen less of it.

CRIM: Well, I would not be so [salient?] about that. If you did not have the kind of [35:00] comprehensive planning and large regional areas that something is going to happen to support desegregation, and we (inaudible) focuses as it related to schools, the black areas, we'd give that out --

up. Similarly, in many cases, kind of build a [wall away?]. And then later on, I think, the business community and other people came back to say, hey, we can't do that.

BAYOR: Can't do what?

CRIM: We can't give it up. We need it, and we're going to have to help protect it. I mean, that they have a vested interest in what happens to kids in this area. But [36:00] during that immediate period, decided, we can't change these events, and the tide of events, and they're going to happen.

BAYOR: I guess I just don't feel that white flight [was inevitable?]. I mean, obviously some of the --

CRIM: Well, again, all I can do is just relate it to what has taken place throughout the country. I know good people have done everything they knew to, and every possible strategy, and it has not stopped or stemmed the tide of people leaving major cities. The only places where -- that seem to have worked is when [37:00] they had been much more of a voluntary nature, and where you had some natural desegregation, and that's been post-'60 kind of attitudes and a lot of good people (inaudible). There's a greater tolerance.

BAYOR: I suppose (inaudible) public schools in some places. I guess residential areas have changed. And again, as you

said, that’s a probably more acceptable way of desegregating schools. (inaudible)

CRIM: But that could not have been possible with the kind of dramatic shift and change which took place during the ’60s, if that had not occurred. Today -- when I first came to Atlanta, no one lived out in Marietta. [38:00] I mean, blacks just didn’t live there.

BAYOR: [Ken Parker went there for years?].

CRIM: It’s a very commonplace kind of thing. Who is it, I think we have a black city councilman in Marietta, [and I like him?]. There is just a difference as it relates to how people kind of accept these kinds of changes and how they can accept people. But it would not have been possible without the difficult times which most communities confronted. When you think of (inaudible), when you think about what has happened throughout the state -- and there’s still a good deal of conservative feelings about, [39:00] well, all kinds of feelings about social mixtures. You’d be surprised at the number of the -- State Education Commission, when we went about the state conducting hearings on kindergarten. You would think everybody would want their child to have a kindergarten experience, but that wasn’t quite the case. In some ways, that was related to the feeling that children may come into contact with

other children that are socially and racially [at earlier ages?] and that something would happen to them. Thank God I know we have some dramatic changes.

BAYOR: Has the white population, student population, (inaudible)?

CRIM: It has [40:00] slipped a little bit. But there again, it's more of a factor to the disparities in the birth rate at this point than the children. In some places, we're beginning to see [intent?].

BAYOR: How does the [intent?] work? Getting whites into majority black schools (inaudible)?

CRIM: We have not had much of that, as you would imagine. Despite the fact that the equality of (inaudible) School and the science program, we had a few months to apply for that particular school. That's encouraging, but not to any significant degree that you would think that you'd have a trend.

BAYOR: Guess one of the answers there is centrally-located high schools with [41:00] magnet-school approaches to them.

CRIM: I would not in any way want to suggest that we shouldn't keep on trying and finding different and better ways of doing it. As we begin to think about how we're going to really productively utilize technology, we also ought to think of some of the times that the value

concerns, such as desegregation and other things and matters, because if there's one area which we have slipped dramatically, it's in the whole area of community values and family values and the like. [And the idea?] because we're running like crazy [42:00] trying to make certain that we use technology well, and that we also are going to have to think through high-[touch?] kinds of concerns. I think, in many respects, children will be far more desperate to learn some of these technical skills.

BAYOR: As they're starting to gain technological skills (inaudible). One last question. Did you find much resistance to yourself within the school bureaucracy when you first took over?

CRIM: Well, it's like anything else: you have to earn your way. It took me almost two years before everybody clearly accorded me some respect. For the most part, everybody wanted to make my superintendency work.

BAYOR: [43:00] You didn't find any racial adversity?

CRIM: No. It's like any other leadership responsibility. I had a few assassins. I had to keep my own eye out. Other than that -- I think people, at the time of my coming, they were so desirous of getting the school system stabilized, and so hopeful, that we would not experience any kind of violence or major disturbances. They were willing and

ready to do anything that they could do in order to obtain those ends. The mission at that particular time -- when I was interviewed, I asked the board [44:00] what they felt my major task would be. And almost going around the table, each board member said, “Successfully desegregate the system.” They didn’t speak to instruction (inaudible). I think the board represented many people in the community. They were so concerned that there would be some possible violent situations in the school system. As I indicated earlier, we had a relatively easy situation. Relatively. I mean, in comparison to many other school systems. It went off almost without a hitch. [45:00]

BAYOR: I think it was a good experience in general.

CRIM: Atlanta has been a good experience.

BAYOR: Atlanta is a little different than other cities, I suppose.

END OF AUDIO FILE