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The Current: What does the debate over school segregation reveal about the Democratic primary field?

Friday, July 5, 2019

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to "The Current," part of the Brookings Podcast Network. At the first Democratic primary debate, a tense confrontation between Senator Kamala Harris and former Vice President Joe Biden over the history of busing and school segregation opened a window into generational, racial, and policy divisions within the Democratic Party.

With us today to discuss this is Jon Valant, a fellow from our Brown Center for Education Policy. Jon, what is it about policy decisions forty years ago by then-Senator Biden that continue to have such relevance for today's candidates?

VALANT: Thanks, Adrianna. So, what started all of this is that last month, Vice President Biden spoke longingly at a fundraiser about his relationship with a couple of Southern segregationist Senators in the 1970s and 80s. He was intending to make a point about civility, but to many Democrats it felt odd or offensive to point to segregationists as an example of how to bring people together.

It's a point of vulnerability for Biden. He very actively opposed busing as a strategy to integrate schools back in the 70s, in some cases siding with Republicans rather than his own party. He has some quotes that sound really jarring in the modern context of the Democratic Party. He talked, for example, about not feeling responsible for the sins of his father and grandfather. And he said, "I'll be damned if I feel responsible to pay for what happened 300 years ago." Now that was back in 1975, but the other Dems saw an opportunity there, especially Senator Harris, who confronted Biden effectively on the debate stage.

She has a compelling personal story to tell on the subject because she was part of a voluntary school integration program in Berkeley. The issue has stayed in the news now – probably because it was the first memorable and dramatic moment from these first couple debates – but some of it too is, it does get at some of the most important distinctions between these Democratic candidates. Some of those are generational distinctions, racial distinctions, and then also ideological distinctions, where we have an issue that may be seen differently by progressives who have sort of an idealistic view of how we should

proceed in this election, and more centrists who are looking for an agenda that feels like it'll be more palatable to that general electorate in 2020.

PITA: So, give us some background context about the state of school segregation today and what the evidence tells us about why it matters so much for students.

VALANT: So, it's not good. School segregation is not just a historical issue, although it has played such a prominent role in the history of education in the United States. Today, most American public school students attend a school that is predominantly white or predominantly non-white. That is, 75% or more white, or 75% or more non-white. That's where most kids are, so most kids are not in a very integrated school environment, and that's a bad thing.

There's been some research on what the effects were of court-ordered integration efforts, including busing, and they were really positive. Some of these studies, the type of thing they would do, they would look at a district that was ordered to integrate and compare the outcomes of kids who were in that district just before and just after the court ordered them to integrate. You see when you make that comparison that students who were under the court-order to integrate, black students had much higher graduation rates, they were much less likely to be in poverty many years later, and all of that happened without much effect on white students. So, there's good reason to believe that integration efforts can make a real difference.

Some of that is a product of funding disparities and lots of disparities that tend to arise when you have overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly nonwhite districts, but there's opportunity for a focus on integrating schools to do a lot of good, both in those measurable outcomes and also in getting kids to interact and understand other kids who look different from them.

PITA: Busing, of course, at the time, was very controversial, faced a lot of white resistance and backlash. And over the years, there have been a couple of Supreme Court decisions that have essentially turned forced busing into a complete non-starter. However, you've pointed out that the other candidates in the Democratic race have a number of other proposals for a way to involve the federal government in promoting school integration. Can you talk a little about that?

VALANT: Whether it's legal or political obstacles, forced busing is not going to happen. There was such opposition, especially among white Americans, to the idea that kids were going to be put on buses and forcibly sent around that that's not going to be the policy response.

There are actually quite a few things the federal government could do right now to improve school integration. A lot of those have to do with housing policies. To a large extent, the segregation we see in schools reflects the segregated ways in which we live. We have a lot of residential segregation in this country and there are policies that the federal government could take up that would address some discriminatory policies that are on the books already. For example, in a lot of localities there are

exclusionary zoning policies that keep multi-family units and apartments from being built in places that have wealthy school districts, and that has the effect of keeping African-American, Hispanic, and other families out. We could see more mortgage assistance to families in poverty who, for example, live in formerly red-lined areas.

But going beyond housing policies, we also right now have federal prohibitions on the use of federal funds for even voluntary busing – so, not mandated busing, but districts where the local folks want a busing program to get kids around. We could eliminate that prohibition. We have some other types of voluntary school choice programs that exist in part to promote integration. For example, magnet schools have long served that purpose. We have some open enrollment policies on the books around the country that allow kids to enroll in districts other than their home district, or schools other than their home school, but often those policies haven't been supported, and they could use an infusion of federal funds and attention.

PITA: So, how do you anticipate this continuing to play out throughout the rest of the Democratic primary?

VALANT: So that's going to be interesting to see. And the politics matter and the policy matters too. On the political side, I'm very curious to see how Senator Harris pursues this and how some of the other Democrats pursue it. I think she would very much like to make this a personal story for her so she can keep talking about her past in Berkeley, and then also a story of Joe Biden's history, because this is not the part of Biden's record that he likely wants to be talking about. She may not want this to turn into a conversation about what we ought to do as far as school busing goes.

For Vice President Biden, it's also going to be interesting to see how he handles this. Because on the surface it seems like he'll want to bury the story. It's gone on for a while now, and he's probably sick of seeing these headlines, because it does make him look out of step with where the Democratic electorate is right now. On the other hand, there is a way for him to turn this into an argument that the progressive candidates are too risky and they're taking these kind of big, bold, unpopular ideas to this 2020 presidential election that Democrats really want to win. Even apart from the policy, he may see an opportunity here, and I wouldn't be surprised if we see him talking about this more willingly and probably less clumsily as time goes on.

On the policy side – politics aside – we're not, again, going to see a forced busing program around the country, but this is a big issue for schools. It has been for a very long time and it will continue to be for a very long time. On the policy side, I think we're all hoping and working to make sure that however the politics on this shake out, the policies we get improve the opportunities and outcomes for all kids in the US and improve the chances for different kids who look different and who come from very different backgrounds to actually be in classrooms together and get to know one another a little better.

PITA: Let's hope. Jon, thanks for explaining this to us today.

JON: Thanks, Adrianna.