The canon of the modern civil rights movement is replete with powerful symbols of dramatic confrontation: the federal troops in Little Rock, the fire hoses in Birmingham, the burning buses in Boston. The sensational theater of overt racism, however, all too often obscures the true backstage banality of unequal opportunity. The many tools used to preserve racial and economic segregation are elusive, adaptable, fluid, and disposable. They are seldom unambiguous and commonly cannot be traced to discrete human agency. In part because they are so amorphous, they do not fit comfortably with the heroes, villains, triumphs, and tragedies that transform discrimination into common cause.

In Columbus, where no violence accompanied school desegregation, the ever-present threat of confrontation became the focal point, and its absence as the buses rolled quickly assumed the needed role of dramatic denouement. As a result, when the shadow of this threat finally lifted, the complex problems that came into
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view seemed to many to have been produced by desegregation itself. Busing thus became the catchall culprit for the Columbus Public School District’s ills.

The belief that school desegregation is to blame for public education’s problems has hardened into conventional wisdom in Columbus. Yet desegregation failed to ensure equal educational opportunity not because it was inherently detrimental to learning, but because it was intrinsically incompatible with new residential real estate development. Even before the first buses rolled in Columbus, the threat of desegregation had redefined the parameters of single-family housing in the city, essentially turning the boundaries of the Columbus school district into a residential development redline. The myriad resources that follow new housing development—the financial as well as the “social” capital—were both exiting and avoiding the city school system by 1979; busing simply solidified and intensified this ongoing process. Moreover, because the borders of the city school district and the borders of the city had been diverging since 1965, suburban school systems had come to serve a major portion of Columbus by 1979. For the growth consensus that had done so much to preserve the peace before desegregation, the existence of these “common areas”—Columbus territory served by suburban school districts—provided a residential development safety valve, disengaging Columbus’s growth from the growth of the Columbus schools. In essence, the long-term health of the city schools was sacrificed to preserve the expansion of the city itself.

The product of this process has been a decline in the status of the Columbus Public Schools, from development necessity to development barrier and, ultimately, to development hazard. The main characters, however, are not only the individuals involved, but also the seemingly tangential tools they used to facilitate this abandonment, tools as varied and obscure as school boundary laws, municipal annexation procedures, water and sewer service extensions, and “For Sale” signs.
With no natural borders to restrain its sprawl, Columbus expanded rapidly after World War II primarily by encroaching on and then absorbing surrounding fields and farmland. The procedure by which this unincorporated territory was brought into the city is known in Ohio as annexation. Annexations are typically initiated by property owners who hope to improve the marketability or developability of their land by gaining access to the services provided by a contiguous, incorporated city or village. To begin the process, a petition laying out the area to be annexed must be signed by a majority of landowners within that area and submitted to the three-person Board of County Commissions. If the annexing municipality can demonstrate its capacity to provide adequate services, the petition is generally approved. Following a series of formal procedures, the land in question is officially incorporated into that municipality.

Though annexation seems a fairly prosaic process on paper, it is, in fact, fraught with politics, conflict, and emotion. Before 1955, public schools were perhaps the primary source of controversy. Until that year, state law mandated that school district territory transfer accompany municipal annexation. So, for example, if a Clinton Township farm was annexed to Columbus, that property automatically had to be transferred to the Columbus Public School District. While the requirement that municipalities and their school districts have coterminous boundaries simplified maps and reduced administrative paperwork, it also complicated development, linking land transfers to the emotional bond between a community and its schools. Holdouts residing in areas to be annexed often put up fierce resistance, claiming allegiance to the local school district already serving their children. Or, if the property in question was particularly tax rich, the school system that stood to lose the land would accuses the annexing municipality of a revenue-motivated territory grab. As a result, annexation frequently generated bitter battles
between rural residents and urban, pro-growth interests and between small townships and larger municipalities.  

The creation of the State Board of Education in 1955 was intended, in part, to facilitate development by detaching the school district issue from municipal annexation debates. After 1955, school districts seeking to absorb municipally annexed land had to petition the twenty-three-member state board for approval; while coterminous boundaries were still preferable, after 1955 they were no longer automatic. Consequently, it became possible for territory to remain in its original school district despite being annexed to a municipality served by a different district.

During its first decade, the state board emphasized jurisdictional consolidation, favoring large schools and large school systems. This emphasis gave the flourishing, fiscally sound Columbus Public School District an advantage over smaller, poorer neighbors. From 1957 to mid-1964, the state board rejected only four of Columbus’s forty-four annexation requests, enabling the district to keep pace with the determined expansionism of exuberant Democratic mayor Maynard Sensenbrenner.

Narrowly elected in 1953, Sensenbrenner took over a straining city whose stagnant boundaries contained too many people and too little available land. With residential and industrial development spilling into the unincorporated townships of Franklin County, Columbus for the first time faced the Cleveland-like prospect of encirclement by its rapidly growing suburbs. If surrounding municipalities captured too much of the advancing sprawl, Columbus’s capacity for long-term expansion would be choked off.

Swiftly and decisively, Sensenbrenner concluded that the city’s best defense was an assertive offense. With the enthusiastic backing of the Wolfe-owned Dispatch, the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce, the Metropolitan Committee, and the area’s developers, the mayor embarked on an aggressive effort to gobble up unincorporated land. “Sensenbrenner made annexation his thing,” said Kline Roberts. “Columbus would not be surrounded like Cleveland or Cincinnati. He even threatened to annex Cleveland.”
In the campaign to corral new development in Franklin County, Columbus's most effective weapon was its near monopoly on water and sewer services. The city already supplied utilities to several surrounding suburbs, and only it possessed the infrastructure, the expertise, and the economies of scale necessary to service the area's unclaimed growth safely and efficiently. Seizing on these essential services as leverage, the Sensenbrenner administration in 1954 declared annexation to Columbus a precondition for the extension of water and sewer lines. To access utilities, developers had to bring their land either into the city itself or into a suburb whose service area was carefully controlled by Columbus. As a result, the city was able to stave off suburban encirclement while securing a substantial portion of Franklin County's new development. Having grown only forty square miles in its first 142 years, Columbus more than doubled in area from 1954 to 1959, becoming the largest city in Ohio by the end of the decade.

After the city's growth surge stalled somewhat under one-term Republican mayor Ralston Westlake, Sensenbrenner returned to office determined to resume the expansionism that had become his hallmark. By 1964, however, the dynamics of development had shifted. The region's rapid growth was moving farther toward the fringes of Franklin County, outstripping even Columbus's steadily enlarging borders. New housing, employment opportunities, and freeway construction worked symbiotically to draw a ballooning middle class to communities outside the city. From 1950 to 1960, for example, the population of Hilliard on the west side of Franklin County grew 923 percent, that of Reynoldsburg on the east side 976 percent; other suburbs would develop as spectacularly over the next three decades.

Along with this physical and demographic growth came an increase in suburban political clout at the municipal, county, and state levels. Because interjurisdictional battles could only chill metropolitan economic development, Columbus city leaders recognized that cooperating with their neighbors had become not merely desirable, but also necessary. Thus, in 1964, Sensenbrenner administration
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city services director Warren "Hap" Cremeans began entering Columbus into a new round of water and sewer service contracts with adjoining Franklin County municipalities. "Thereafter," explained Harrison Smith Jr., central Ohio's foremost annexation attorney since the 1950s, "each of the contracting suburbs could grow up to a predetermined size and over a specific area, and the remaining [unincorporated territory] could be annexed and served only by Columbus." While these contracts preserved both the city's service monopoly and its ability to expand, they also would prove overly generous, opening the door for the outer ring of suburbs to eventually capture far more development than was originally anticipated.

Some local leaders viewed the city-suburban collaboration represented by Cremeans's new service contracts as the first step toward the eventual "metropolitanization" of the entire region. Metropolitanizing Franklin County meant transforming it into a single, more efficient economic unit by eliminating jurisdictional fragmentation, administrative redundancy, and service duplication. For a time, area officials considered applying this idea to the county's school systems. "Within the next ten to fifteen years," Columbus school superintendent Harold Eibling suggested in 1966, "the citizens of Columbus may see . . . a school district reorganization in Franklin County designed to include the Columbus City District and all other suburban and local school districts in one large Franklin County Metropolitan School District." The 1968 Cunningham Report urged an even shorter timetable: "The metropolitan area of Columbus should have a Metropolitan School Authority within five years," it declared. Yet while the drive toward metropolitanization took hold in some areas of local governance, it was derailed before reaching the realm of public education by another dynamic shaping city-suburban growth: race.

By the mid-1960s, civil rights had become the nation's most pressing and controversial domestic issue, and public education stood at the center of the debate. Nationally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had granted the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare the authority to investigate segregation in local school districts, and
African American community control movements had emerged in cities around the country. Locally, the proportion of blacks in the Columbus Public Schools was gradually rising, with racial turnover in central city neighborhoods producing more black-white contact and heightened interracial conflict within individual school buildings. Black parents and civil rights groups, meanwhile, had commenced their increasingly vocal calls for systemwide integration. By 1965, the connotations of the Columbus Public Schools had subtly begun to shift: a city school system was just starting to become an "inner city" school system.

As a consequence, racial intimations infected the already controversial school district land transfer issue. For the better part of its first decade, the State Board of Education had favored the efficiency of large school districts like Columbus in its transfer rulings. By the mid-1960s, however, consolidation's political pitfalls were beginning to overshadow its economic virtues. Migration from the cities had multiplied the influence of suburban interests in the electorate and on the state board, providing an increasingly sympathetic ear to arguments that Columbus's annexation efforts robbed burgeoning suburban school systems of potentially tax-rich property. Parents fleeing urban areas for the sanctuary of new subdivisions became particularly incensed when territory transfer meant their new home would no longer be in the school district they had originally sought. Meanwhile, desegregation suits brought against two Ohio school boards had raised but not resolved the question of the state's responsibility to remedy de facto segregation. Growing suburban clout thus combined with the threat of integration to produce an abrupt reversal in the state board's attitude toward territory transfer in Franklin County. On August 8, 1965, the all-white board rejected eight of the Columbus Public Schools' nine transfer requests. This quiet triumph of expediency over efficiency marked the beginning of the city of Columbus's disengagement from the Columbus Public Schools.

After 1965, the size of the city and the size of the school district began to diverge sharply. While the Sensenbrenner administration
accelerated its annexation efforts, what school superintendent Eibling called the state board’s “inconsistent rulings” on territory transfers chilled the school district’s ability to keep pace. “There were bloody battles to block Columbus,” Hap Cremeen recalled. “Believe me, it got rough. But we always had the pat answer: the [disputed territory’s] school district didn’t change.” In 1967, the state board declared a temporary moratorium on territory transfers, directing individual districts to reach permanent boundary agreements that would eliminate the uncertainty engendered by potential annexation. The moratorium soon dissolved, however, with only one such compact having been reached.¹⁵

By the beginning of the 1970s, additional factors had come to inhibit the Columbus school district’s ability to expand. Land annexed by the city was generally underdeveloped and sparsely populated. With the school system’s fiscal credibility already in decline, it was difficult for the board to justify pursuing residential development with comparatively little property tax payoff.¹⁶ At the same time, heightening racial tension and increasing overcrowding threw into question the district’s ability to serve adequately its existing population, let alone the additional students new home building would eventually generate. Given its strained race relations and facilities, the district recognized that it could not persuade an already averse state board to endorse further expansion.

There remained, nonetheless, one final test of Columbus’s ability to confront the growing influence of suburban resistance. On April 12, 1971, the state board approved the transfer of the insolvent Mifflin Local School District to Columbus. Under normal circumstances, suburban officials would have quietly applauded the city schools’ absorbing Mifflin’s 42.5 percent black enrollment; certainly, their districts would not have accepted the students without a fight. The storms of protest that accompanied the Mifflin transfer instead concerned the Columbus schools’ compensation for taking over the bankrupt district: 8.7 square miles of territory served at the time by seven different suburban systems. Most controversial was the transfer of the “Golden Finger,” a tax-rich, 910-acre sliver along Route 33
northwest of downtown that contained dozens of industrial and commercial establishments and just a handful of Grandview Heights students.\textsuperscript{17}

For the next five years, suburban officials fought the transfer deal in both the state legislature and the state courts. Calling the agreement a "plunder" and a "land grab," Republican state representative Alan Norris from suburban Westerville failed twice to pass legislation that would have made school territory transfer contingent on the approval of voters in the annexed district.\textsuperscript{18} Meanwhile, the suburbs' legal challenge wound its way through the state courts, culminating in a 1976 Ohio Supreme Court ruling upholding the jurisdictional authority of the State Board of Education.\textsuperscript{19} The Golden Finger transfer finally took place that bicentennial fall, having paralyzed the Columbus schools' annexation aims for five years.

If the state board's mid-1960s policy shift hindered the city school district's ability to keep up with municipal growth, the Mifflin–Golden Finger controversy extinguished it. Columbus school administrators understood that the initiation of any major territory transfer not involving tax-poor property or a significant population of African American students would meet with a frosty response from state board members and hostile obstructionism from suburban residents and elected officials. Testifying before the Ohio House Education Committee at a 1975 hearing on Rep. Norris's proposed territory transfer bill, Columbus administrator Howard Merriman sardonically observed, "It was all right for Columbus to annex a troubled, financially unsound district, which had lost accreditation, which has buildings in sad need of repair, additions and remodeling, which had a minority population of consequence—but not all right to annex areas from other districts." \textsuperscript{20} Faced by then with full-scale desegregation and worsening fiscal problems, Columbus school officials could no longer stomach spending years in state courts and legislative hearing rooms in a laborious quest for land and students they lacked the money to serve. Moreover, politically ambitious board members such as Steven Boley and Virginia Prentice recognized that a drawn-out transfer try might alienate the growing portion of
Columbus voters who lived in suburban school districts. By the implementation of desegregation in 1979, the boundaries of the city and the city school system, essentially coterminous just fifteen years earlier, had dramatically diverged: The Columbus Public School District served only 109 of the City of Columbus's 180 square miles.

"DeSegregation Means DeUrbanization": Race, Penick, and Development

When the "common areas"—Columbus territory served by suburban school systems—began to emerge in the late 1960s, they had little immediate impact on development patterns in Franklin County. Passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 barely dented residential segregation, and the neighborhood schools along the city school district's flourishing fringe remained securely all-white. For two decades, developers had cooperated closely with Columbus school administrators to coordinate school and housing construction, a collaboration that continued through the early 1970s. New schools helped sell new subdivisions, and new subdivisions represented continued economic growth; this relationship was underscored by the heavy-hitting support of city leaders so critical to passage of 1972's $89.5 million bond issue, the largest commitment of bricks and mortar in the school district's history. "In the last four years," stated the endorsement of the city council and Mayor Moody, "30,000 dwelling units have been built [in Columbus] but not one school. . . . Inasmuch as the economic well-being of this community and its people is contingent upon its educational system, it is imperative every effort be extended in supporting this proposal." In the afterglow of the district's election-day triumph, Superintendent John Ellis declared, "The building program will enable the school system to be a valuable partner in the growth and progress of the city."21
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Ellis's understandably enthusiastic prediction turned out to be wholly inaccurate. Though it seemed at the time a dramatic reaffirmation of the Columbus public school system's indispensability, the 1972 bond issue instead marked the end of twenty years of district-developer reciprocity. Never again would city schools be used to sell new subdivisions; never again would they be treated as a boon rather than a barrier to Columbus's growth. After 1972, the Columbus Public School District quickly and irreversibly came to be seen not as indispensable to development but as incompatible with it.22

Like squeezing the center of a balloon, the prospect of school desegregation drove single-family housing development out of the Columbus schools and into surrounding suburban systems. Combined with the Supreme Court's Keyes decision, which opened the door to desegregation in northern, urban school districts, the filing of Penick in 1973 injected a degree of uncertainty into the central city home-building market that chilled capital investment. With real estate agents no longer able to guarantee prospective home buyers a predictable neighborhood school assignment, bankers, developers, and builders were unwilling to risk their resources on new construction within the boundaries of the city school system. Once the developments that drove the 1972 bond issue were completed, single-family home building within the Columbus school district ground to a halt. "From 1970 to 1972," said Carl Klein, research supervisor for the Planning Division of the Columbus Development Department, "probably 50 percent of the subdivisions [in Columbus] were platted in the Columbus school district. That falls to 20 percent in '73 and '74, and then it drops down."23 A 1983 Development Department study stated that "since 1975, new [single-family housing] construction in the Columbus school district has been reduced to the point of insignificance." Observed Klein, "It's clear that first [desegregation] was being talked about, and then it was being pursued, and that seemed to have a triggering effect."24 Indeed, it was the threat of desegregation, not desegregation itself, that transformed the Columbus Public School District into a virtually unbreachable barrier to residential development.
During the early and mid-1970s, sociologists such as James Coleman began to raise the controversial argument that school desegregation exacerbated the ongoing American exodus from cities to suburbs. In order to escape busing, they contended, middle-class whites fled urban school systems for the sanctity of surrounding suburban areas, ultimately leaving desegregated districts poorer and more segregated than before. "The emerging problem with regard to school desegregation," Coleman wrote, "is the problem of segregation between central city and suburbs; in addition, current means by which schools are being desegregated are intensifying that problem rather than reducing it." Because school district and municipal boundaries were coterminous in most major cities, outmigrants had to flee to—and inmigrants settle in—separate suburban jurisdictions to escape court-ordered busing. By depleting municipal tax bases, Coleman and others argued, this process of "resegregation" accelerated the decay of urban schools and the decline of large American cities.

Columbus's unusual growth patterns, however, allowed it to escape this kind of municipal decline. More Sunbelt sprawl than Rust Belt bulk, the city was, in one resident's words, "a suburb without an urb." Through its annexation and water-sewer policies, Columbus had avoided the "white noose" of suburban encirclement; by the early 1970s, in fact, the city had expanded so rapidly that several neighboring municipalities had become "inburbs," suburbs entirely surrounded by Columbus territory. Most important, the growth of the common areas meant that much of the developable land on the city's periphery remained outside the Columbus Public School District and, consequently, beyond the reach of desegregation. The Supreme Court's 1974 Milliken decision, which essentially sanctioned white flight by braking busing at urban school district borders, ensured that the common areas would remain securely served by suburban schools. As a result, Columbus, unlike many other cities, was able to sustain its economic and geographic growth in the shadow of imminent desegregation. Rather than drive development out of the city, the threat of busing merely defined where it
would occur within the city. The boundaries of the Columbus Public School District thus became the "redline" within which new residential development—and the economic activity that followed it—would no longer take place.\textsuperscript{28}

For the developers, builders, and real estate agents who had worked so closely with the school district through the bond issue of 1972, it was an ideal scenario for a housing market faced with impending busing. They could still build homes in the city, taking advantage of less-restrictive zoning, smaller, lower-cost lots, and guaranteed water-sewer service with quicker, cheaper tap-in. At the same time, they could use the threat of busing as a marketing tool, promoting the perceived safety and stability of overwhelmingly white suburban school districts. "Developers had the best of both worlds," said Calvin Smith, director of the Columbus schools' desegregation monitoring office, "because they could still develop in the City of Columbus, but develop in other school districts [which] were not being desegregated and wouldn't ever have to fear that."\textsuperscript{29}

By 1977, developers had begun openly peddling the desirability of "not Columbus." Said Smith, "They knew that if they didn't market their other developments as being in specific school districts, they wouldn't appeal to a certain clientele." Realtors promoted suburban schools in their sales efforts, with ads, billboards, and "For Sale" signs that for the first time displayed the name of the district serving each property, as long as it was not Columbus. Whereas in 1970, individual Columbus schools were identified as repositories for poor and minority children, by mid-decade, the district as a whole had been so branded. "It wasn't that big a deal whether you went to [Columbus] North High School or you went to [suburban] Worthington back in 1958," observed Jim Hyre, Columbus superintendent from 1982 to 1987, "and it wasn't that big a deal in 1968. But in 1978, North was closed, you had to go to [predominantly black] Linden-McKinley. You were in that assignment pattern. That issue became a major item."\textsuperscript{30}

Mostly the messages were subtle.\textsuperscript{31} An ad in the April 10, 1977,
Columbus Dispatch preyed upon the urgency of parents seeking to pull their children from the city schools by dropping carefully coded intimations of racial exclusivity. "DeSegregation means DeUrbanization," the ad read. "Consider raising your family in the Northcountry. . . . After our initial conversation, we'll go on an orientation tour of the Northcountry and check out the properties of special interest to you or I'll list your special requirement and call you when something comes available. Whether you're anxious to find something or just looking, we know everything that's available in the Northcountry." Occasionally, however, the signals were less ambiguous. "Don't Bus, Come Live with Us," urged one developer. In a particularly egregious episode, HER, the area's largest realtor, "put up billboards portraying cannibals cooking missionaries, with the caption, 'Feeling Crowded?'" "Of course, the cannibals were all black and people in the pot were all white," recalled Beverly Gifford. "It was terrible." When city councilman Jerry Hammond complained, HER quickly removed the billboards and apologized, claiming that any racial implications had been unintended.

While developers capitalized on looming desegregation to sell new subdivisions, suburban officials exploited Penick as well, using the fear of urban schools as both carrot and stick in their late 1970s levy campaigns. Despite soaring inflation, antitax anger, and a statewide school funding crisis, every suburban district in Franklin County approved a levy between November 1976 and November 1978. Threats of insolvency and, consequently, consolidation with Columbus "had a tendency to soften the tax attitude of people in the suburbs," said Westerville superintendent Harold Rowe after his district passed an 11.3-mill levy in 1977. Another suburban superintendent, who said he would deny the quote if attributed, was referring to Judge Duncan's decision when he told a Dispatch reporter in late 1977, "You know as well as I do why levies failed in November and passed this spring." Suburban officials, said Robert Weiler, cochair of Columbus's 1979 levy campaign, "used Columbus in every way possible. The threat that their kids would go into Columbus
was probably the greatest motivation for supporting the suburban schools. How do you think the suburbs got their bond issues passed? 'If we don't pass it, we'll go into Columbus.'”

While the controversy surrounding school desegregation contributed to suburban levy victories, it tipped the tally the other direction in Columbus school votes. With antibusing activists voicing explicit levy opposition and white board members indicating tacit disapproval, resentful city voters vented their various frustrations at the ballot box. Forty-four additional operating levies were approved in Franklin County from 1969 to 1981, but none in the Columbus school district. Between 1976 and 1979 alone, Columbus failed four times to persuade voters to approve new moneys, despite strong support from the chamber of commerce and the mayor's office. Changes in state law magnified the impact of these levy losses. In 1976, the Ohio legislature passed a property tax rollback law intended to protect home owners from inflation. By reducing millage to counter inflationary growth in property values, the rollback stabilized tax rates for Ohio home owners. As a consequence, however, school districts needed revenue growth from either new construction or higher taxes to keep pace with rapidly rising costs. Older, central-city systems were thus forced to go to the voters more frequently just to meet mandates or maintain existing programs, while ballot issues in expanding suburban districts often involved new facilities and additional services. Staggered by the one-two punch of inflation and levy defeats, the Columbus Public School District had to take out an embarrassing $8.6 million loan from the General Assembly’s school bankruptcy fund in 1978 simply to stay open. Operating at state minimum standards from 1976 to 1981, Columbus endured $28 million in budget cuts and a staff reduction of 888. Superintendent Joe Davis described the district's fiscal distress as "the most perilous financial times the Columbus Public Schools have faced since the depths of the Depression." Columbus’s skeletal budget thus stood in sharp contrast to the fiscal stability of adjacent districts, part of a desegregation-related development spiral that accelerated city-suburban educational dis-
parities. To suburban school systems, more single-family home buyers meant a broader base of voting middle-class taxpayers with children in the public schools, a corresponding increase in commercial development, and the tangible financial and intangible psychological advantages of expansion; all of this, in turn, attracted more single-family home buyers, continuing the cycle and perpetuating the exodus of residential development from the city school district. Columbus, meanwhile, was left with a stagnating tax base, an increasing proportion of economically disadvantaged students, and a shrinking core of voters with school-age children. These factors interacted with the prolonged *Penick* process, undermining the city school district's ability to compete with its suburban neighbors for middle-class families lured to central Ohio by its reliable economy. Commented Davis, "If a guy gets transferred in from Pittsburgh, he's not going to want to move into a district that is facing controversy over desegregation and doesn't know if it can keep its doors open."45

Despite the administration's initial denials, some desegregation-related middle-class flight did occur, particularly from the district's white northwest fringe. "Every time the NAACP makes a statement, we lose twenty-five kids," cracked one northwest Columbus principal. Ultimately, flight from the Columbus schools conformed to the pattern exhibited by most desegregated urban districts: the number of outmigrants surged from the year of the verdict through the year following implementation, stabilizing soon afterwards. Much of the system's steep enrollment decline, however, must be attributed to baby bust birth rates. Only three of sixteen Franklin County school districts saw enrollment grow between 1973 and 1983, and several, including lily-white Upper Arlington, lost a larger percentage of pupils than Columbus did. Over time, therefore, the district's most vexing problem proved not to be flight—existing home owners escaping Columbus—but middle-class "avoidance"—new home buyers never locating in the city school system.

Whether real estate interests drove or followed the housing market beyond the Columbus Public School District is a chicken-and-egg question. With profitable development dependent on a
combination of information, anticipation, and access to capital, the post-1972 plunge in platted Columbus school district lots indicates a real estate community steering its investments toward safety. Anticipating the probable outcome of Penick, developers quit building houses within Columbus Public School District boundaries because they had every reason to believe, based on past practices and national trends, that the market could not reliably support them. "Developers are going to develop and builders are going to build where they can sell homes," said local developer Don Epler. "Other parts of the country had experienced [desegregation], and the general development and building community [in central Ohio] knew that it was going to affect their sales."49 In desegregation's shadow, class, race, and education intersected with Columbus's fiscal instability and student assignment uncertainty to make suburban school districts more appealing to middle-class home buyers.

By anticipating the market, however, developers also shaped it. While Columbus Public School District boundaries continued to contain a large stock of attractive existing homes, after around 1975, prospective buyers could only look to suburban school systems for new homes. Though the aggregate number of housing units within Columbus school borders grew 18.1 percent during the 1970s, practically all of that increase occurred in the years surrounding the 1972 bond issue. By mid-decade, a consensus clearly had been reached that city schools were an unacceptable investment risk. With the herdlike momentum that inevitably governs development, this consensus had become virtually ironclad by desegregation's implementation. As a result, between 1980 and 1990, the total number of housing units inside the Columbus Public School District actually dropped 2.1 percent; during the same span, aggregate housing units in the city of Columbus increased 17.5 percent. Population statistics further illustrate this trend. From 1970 to 1990, the municipal population served by Columbus schools dropped 11.5 percent, while the population of the city as a whole rose 14.7 percent. Moreover, the proportion of the city's population living in the common areas grew from insignificance to 23 percent during those twenty years.50
Hence, a vicious circle emerged: because real estate interests perceived no post-Penick market for new homes in the Columbus school district, there ceased to be development; and because there was no development, there ceased to be a market.

Developers argued that their decision making was driven by money rather than color, that they aspired to minimize risk, not racial mixing. "They don't develop to try to segregate," said Robert Weiler, chair of a large local development company and a Columbus school board member from 1985 to 1991. "They develop to sell houses. Their only motive is profit." Recognizing that such a contention can be both accurate and disingenuous, however, is fundamental to understanding the relationship between development and desegregation.51

School desegregation as it came to be carried out was the product of a progressive liberal paradigm of racial inequality, one that viewed racism manifested in segregation as a malignant but curable historical cancer. If equal rights could contain the cancer, then integration would eventually eliminate it. Premised on this ideal, the modern Civil Rights movement proved extraordinarily successful; in one generation, it substantially succeeded in lifting the political, legal, and social controls that for centuries had sustained America's racial caste system.

As public racism became more offensive, however, private discrimination grew more defensive. The controls that the Civil Rights movement eliminated had been designed to address the twin fears that had historically sustained white racism: the fear of physical retribution and the fear of social (and sexual) pollution. In its efforts to eliminate public barriers to black "encroachment," the Civil Rights movement reignited these deeply ingrained white fears; the shift from rights to remedies, with its goal of winning state sanction to compel black advancement, fanned the flames.

As the most individually intrusive of the remedies attempted, busing for school desegregation provoked the most volatile response. Because it was intended to effect more than mere token interracial contact, it amplified the fundamental axiom of post-Brown
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racial dynamics: what is integration to whites is isolation to blacks; what is integration to blacks is invasion to whites. By eliminating the certainty and security of the neighborhood school, busing shattered the sanctuary provided by continued residential segregation, exposing white children to the perceived hazards associated with a significant black presence: physical danger, educational devaluation, sexual promiscuity, lax discipline, and so on. In doing so, it revealed the force of race and racial fear as permanent, structural features of the American marketplace, a paralyzingly nebulous enemy that the liberal black-white alliance that drove the Civil Rights movement was neither adequately prepared to confront nor flexible enough to combat.

The reciprocal relationship between residential segregation and the neighborhood school had long made education a fundamental locational element of new development. To America’s suburbanizing white middle class, good neighborhoods meant good schools and vice versa, and neither was compatible with anything more than minimal integration. “We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem,” observed William Levitt, the nation’s most influential postwar home builder, “but we cannot combine the two.” While lifting the legal structures of residential segregation largely eliminated overt discrimination from the housing market, it did little to abolish the role of race in determining the desirability of an area. Race was no longer a discrete locational sales point, like proximity to shopping or a good view. Instead, it became an unspoken but understood element of other market variables—superficially race-neutral factors such as safety, quiet, comfort, status, stricter zoning, and school quality were all imbued with seldom-stated racial implications, conscious and subconscious assumptions shared by whites regardless of class or political persuasion. The profitability of residential development thus continued to depend on the relative racial exclusivity of neighborhood and school, even as the methods of ensuring exclusivity grew more elusive. Consequently, the maintenance of a certain degree of housing segregation was not, as Robert Weiler implied, incidental to profit; it was intrinsic to it.
By divorcing urban schools from the private market, busing as a remedy for unequal educational opportunity provided both an incentive and an escape hatch for the abandonment of desegregated systems. In Columbus, the threat of busing injected a districtwide dose of uncertainty that proved poisonous to development. The unintended consequence of such an unwieldy, race-conscious remedy was to sharpen the equally race-conscious, but far more nimble, fluid, and subtle responses of the market. Almost instantaneously, Penick shaped and solidified residential development patterns in Columbus, transforming the entire city school district into a "no new housing" zone. Other private and public resources inexorably followed—sewer lines, water mains, roads, property taxes, political clout, commercial development, employment opportunities—creating a cycle in which the exodus of resources worsened the district's existing woes, in turn accelerating the exodus of resources. By no means did this process have an instant, neutron bomb–like impact; rather, its effect was gradual, foreseeable, and, absent both the immediate economic incentive and the political will to confront it, irreversible. By 1979, even before the "forced busing" of a single Columbus student, the structures that would sustain this cycle of abandonment were already in place.

Because of the existence of the common areas, however, the threat of desegregation in Columbus drove development only out of the school district, not out of the city. While city leaders flexed their civic muscles to confront the growth-threatening emergency of implementation, they remained conspicuously silent about a jurisdictional discrepancy that allowed 40 percent of the city to be served by suburban schools. Such an oddity could scarcely proceed unnoticed by Columbus's development-based growth consensus, and the post-Penick shift in development patterns demonstrates that it did not. The complicity of city leaders in the expansion and development of the common areas indicates that, from the beginning, they viewed desegregation itself as incompatible with growth. The common areas thus proved a unique and effective safety valve, preserving both public-private and city-suburban cooperation in the economic and geographic growth of the metropolitan area.
By ensuring Columbus's capacity to expand, the common areas also safeguarded the influence of the city's white business elite over major civic matters. Reducing the proportion of African Americans in a city—and, consequently, their political clout—is often a primary motivation for aggressive annexation or for consolidation with neighboring municipalities; Richmond and Indianapolis can be viewed as examples of this strategy. Columbus, however, seems to be the only city where municipal annexation was pursued while school territory transfer was not, a combination that preserved a "safe" white majority in the city even as it more closely clustered blacks in the city schools.

Columbus's growth consensus never entirely forsook the Columbus Public School District, which was still too healthy and educated too much of the region's labor force to abandon entirely: The chamber of commerce continued to fund and run levy campaigns, and the rhetoric of civic leaders consistently stressed the impact of urban education on the prosperity of central Ohio. Still, business community backing for the desegregated district manifested itself not in the warm handshake of wholehearted partnership, but in the desperate clasp of emergency support, holding the district up while the ground gave way beneath it. Urban League executive director Frank Lomax lamented this crisis-driven perspective in a report bemoaning the slow dissolution of MCSC: "Some express the notion that since the Columbus Public School system is becoming blacker and poorer, no one is demanding quality and excellence from the system and by implication, [people are] satisfied with mediocrity. Therefore, as long as the system is fairly orderly and quiet without too much notoriety, let it alone, the sentiment goes. This feeling is justified on the basis that the business community can now assume a laissez-faire attitude because of the proximity of the surrounding fifteen school districts that will provide our available labor pool of future employees."

The presence of the common areas enabled desegregation to proceed without handicapping Columbus's growth. Along the way, however, the Columbus Public School District had come to be considered
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a barrier to the residential development key to the city’s expansion. By the time the buses rolled, the entire Columbus Public School District had been branded by the same unspoken assumptions of inferiority and second-class citizenship that stigmatized the poor and minority students it was disproportionately responsible for educating.59 As a result, the interests of the city and the interests of the city schools began to diverge; thereafter, anytime the two conflicted, the city as a rule won out, and the good of the city school district could be sacrificed for the growth of the Columbus metropolitan area.

“It Isn’t Cool to Annex My School”: Annexation, Moratorium, and the Declining Status of the Columbus Schools

By the end of 1979 in Columbus, the fear of burning buses and bomb threats had quietly given way to the day-to-day trials of desegregation’s second generation. With the issue finally out of the “fishbowl” (the nickname of the district’s central office) and into the classroom, the administration and school board could begin to focus on other urgent problems.

One such long-deferred dilemma was annexation. In late 1978, the question of the common areas had been raised briefly by Superintendent Davis in a report to the community called “Choices for the ’80s.” “Choices” offered two possibilities for using territory transfer to bolster the destitute district’s tax base and offset its continuing enrollment slide: (1) aggressively pursue new annexation, or (2) seek legislation that would make city and school district boundaries coterminous. Though the report offered only options, merely raising the issue was enough to provoke swift reaction from suburban schools. Groveport-Madison board member Richard Kettell initiated an effort to forge a coalition of suburban districts threatened
by annexation, saying they should not remain "sitting under the sword, continually faced with the question of what Columbus is going to do." Before the controversy could catch fire, the school board shelved the issue, turning its attention to the more pressing problems of desegregation planning and levy campaigning. Shortly after the start of busing, however, the specter of annexation was raised again, with Davis warning that "at some point, the board will have to look at it." 

In the spring of 1980, as the district braced for another painful round of school closings, that prickly point finally arrived. The previous fall's elections had produced an unprecedented four-person turnover on the board, and three of the new members—Gary Holland, Carole Williams, and Pauline Radebaugh—had pressed the annexation issue hard during the campaign. "Whatever is in the city," Radebaugh maintained, "should be in the school district as a matter of principle and practicality." Said sitting board member Bill Moss, "We are surrounded by increasingly hostile white suburban districts while we continue to close schools and disrupt the educational process in the central city." District officials recognized that any attempt to annex the rapidly developing common areas would spark a storm of protest, making political, judicial, business, and state board support unlikely. Without cooperation, Davis cautioned, "It's an exercise in futility. [We would just] be spinning our wheels." However, some school leaders believed Columbus held a powerful trump: the threat of a metropolitan desegregation suit. Because the Columbus schools educated over 90 percent of Franklin County's African American students, state-sanctioned attempts to impede the district's annexation efforts could be judged intentionally segregative. Fear of metropolitan litigation, Virginia Prentice suggested, might make an already beleaguered state board reluctant to preserve "havens of Columbus schoolchildren who are avoiding desegregation by being in suburban school districts." 

On April 29, 1980, the board emerged from an hourlong closed session to announce that it had directed an administrative team led by Assistant Superintendent Howard Merriman to begin gathering
data on the tax valuation, pupil density, and projected costs of the common areas. "It opened up tremendous controversy," recalled Williams, "because the staff, in order to find out how much land and how many people [were in the common areas], had to ask other districts. The parents in those districts became paralyzed with fear that we came to annex them, which we did not. There was no intention to annex them. They just interpreted that." Repeatedly, the board tried to reassure jittery neighbors that its intentions were innocent. Alarmed suburbanites, however, refused to believe that Merriman's "annexation feasibility study" was anything but the prelude to an imminent invasion.

Indeed, immediately after the board's announcement, the issue exploded with exceptional ferocity. Local state legislators leaped to the defense of their home-owning constituents. State Senator John Kasich, a brash, young Westerville Republican, told a gathering of area business, political, and civic leaders, "People from many parts of Franklin County are extremely upset. I've never had so many calls [in the two years] I've been in office than in the last two weeks on annexation. People choose an area to live in, work hard to purchase property and assume their children will attend certain schools. Then, when all of a sudden the rug is pulled out from under them, they are frustrated and mad." Suburban school officials helped form antiannexation groups to marshal public backing for House Bill 385, proposed state legislation that would grant residents of annexed territory veto power over school land transfers. Three days before the house vote, hundreds assembled at a Statehouse gathering to express support for the proposed bill. The event, reported the Dispatch, had the "feel of a high school football rally," with homemade placards declaring "No Annexation Without Representation," "We Don't Want Any Part of Columbus Schools," and "It Isn't Cool to Annex My School."

On June 14, the Ohio House voted overwhelmingly in favor of HB385, sending the charged legislation back to the Ohio Senate, where it had languished for over a year without action. As testimony began before the Senate Education Committee, rowdy antiannexers
packed Statehouse hearing rooms, cheering their representatives and jeering Columbus administrators. Supporters of the bill asserted that an issue as personal and emotional as school territory transfer should be decided by affected voters, hardworking home owners who had intentionally settled in specific school districts and feared having "the rules changed in the middle of the game." 71 "I am arguing," declared Kasich, "for all the people who worked all their lives to send their kids to the school they want to send them to." 72 The proposed legislation, suburban officials contended, merely reaffirmed the cherished ideal of local control over public schools. Moreover, they maintained, rapidly expanding suburban districts could not securely plan for growth given the perpetual threat of a voracious urban system on their borders. Columbus representatives, on the other hand, condemned the bill as barely cloaked racism, a covert antibusing effort designed to permanently corral the city school district's black and poor population within existing boundaries. All the while, senate Republicans were exploiting the election-year issue as a tool with which to wedge control of the senate from a fragile Democratic majority.

The annexation controversy caught Columbus city leaders in a bind. With an extended campaign already in the works to pass a desperately needed operating levy, they were reluctant to oppose publicly a still-innocuous school initiative such as the annexation study. The study itself, meanwhile, by demonstrating the board's efforts to explore integrative options, could accelerate the district's escape from court control. Enactment of foreseeably segregative antiannexation legislation, on the other hand, could conceivably delay the district's escape by giving civil rights advocates grounds for a metropolitan desegregation suit. Finally, real estate interests feared that legislation democratizing territory transfer could backfire against them; in general, they preferred to keep decisions affecting development away from the public eye and out of the control of the unpredictable masses.

At the same time, however, the city's economic interests stood to benefit from the preservation of noncoterminous school district
boundaries. It was the common areas, after all, that had allowed Columbus to continue growing in the face of school desegregation. Developers expecting to profit from the status quo would suffer substantially from annexation to the city schools. With buyers willing to pay 15 to 20 percent more for the same house in a suburban district, commented Harley E. Rouda, president of the area’s largest residential realty company, “busing is pushing the price of homes upward. Families are moving to avoid busing because they think suburban school systems are better than Columbus.”

Perhaps annexation’s most pressing issue, however, was the uncertainty that the controversy engendered. The prospect of a battle royal between city and suburban school districts threatened the stability needed to attract and nurture development. Consequently, as with the 1972 integration clash and the 1979 implementation of desegregation, city leaders simply wanted to see the issue resolved quietly, moderately, and with minimal public conflict, in a way conducive to the area’s continued growth. The response of the Dispatch typified attempts to balance on annexation’s public tightrope. “What is essential,” the paper advised, “is that the [school board’s] call is for a feasibility study, a cool-headed determination as to whether annexation could be considered within reason.”

Ultimately, the appeal of quiet compromise won out. On September 18, 1980, the Ohio General Assembly approved the first of what eventually would be three two-year moratoria on the transfer of suburban school territory to urban districts. Legislators claimed that the delay would allow them to reach a reasoned, responsible, unemotional solution to a complex issue. But what it really offered was a way for state politicians to avoid handling a racially loaded election-year grenade that many viewed as an exclusively central Ohio problem.

The six-year moratorium served multiple purposes for Columbus’s growth consensus. By diffusing controversy, it helped stave off legislation granting suburban residents veto power over school land transfers, legislation with foreseeably segregative effects and therefore the potential to snowball into a metropolitan desegregation suit.
In the meantime, it allowed development in the common areas to intensify, facilitating Columbus's mid-1980s boom while making annexation even less likely in the future. The moratorium thus ensured, at least temporarily, that issues involving the health of the city school district would remain detached from those affecting the growth of the city itself.

By examining the reaction to Columbus Public School District annexation efforts, it is possible to trace the declining status of urban education in central Ohio. In 1960, the teeming city school system was expanding at the same rate as the city. Armed with the almost automatic approval of the state board of education, the Columbus Public Schools served as a full partner in Columbus's rapid growth. By 1970, however, the district's expansion had been separated from the city's, and suburban systems were coming to be seen as safe havens from increasingly volatile urban schools. Still, Penick, Columbus's problems were restricted to particular buildings; the bulk of its schools remained demographically similar to those in neighboring suburbs. This tension between the city's continued clout and the suburbs' escalating status can be seen in 1971's Mifflin-Golden Finger transfer: while Columbus was able to annex tax-rich suburban land, five years of legislative and legal wrangling ensued before the transfer finally took place.

The annexation moratorium of 1980 revealed that the scales of status had tipped toward suburban schools. Merely by initiating a study of annexation, the desegregated Columbus schools provoked a political brouhaha that proscribed even the possibility of expansion for six years. Said Davis, "The basic issue facing the people of Columbus can be stated simply—will Columbus schools be competitive with schools in the suburbs?" If the moratorium exposed the city school system's lower status, however, then the Win-Win Agreement, reached shortly before the moratorium expired in 1986, officially sanctioned it. Before examining this agreement, though, it is first necessary to understand the apparent resurgence that took place in the Columbus Public School system between the beginning of desegregation in 1979 and the end of the moratorium in 1986.
On a fall Friday a few weeks into desegregation, Robert Duncan went to see his son's Eastmoor High football game. While the parent cheered from the bleachers, the judge took note of the surprising absence of African American cheerleaders on the visiting team's squad. Preliminary statistics had shown promising systemwide biracial participation in high school extracurricular activities. Overall, 44 percent of the district's football players and varsity cheerleaders were black, well within the 20–50 percent racial balance range targeted by the court.78 Troubled by the racial disparity he saw on the sideline, however, Duncan asked desegregation monitor Calvin Smith to investigate.

After meeting with the cheerleaders and their principal, an unsatisfied Smith assembled fifty black girls to find out why only two had tried out for the prestigious squad. "They said it was because the school used a form of cheerleading that they didn't care for," Smith recalled. The girls told the cheerleading-naive administrator they preferred the "American" style, with its emphasis on flips and dancing, to the formation-oriented "military" version their new school practiced. Before desegregation, Smith discovered, the former had been more common to black schools, the latter to white schools. Following another round of meetings, Smith convinced the current cheerleaders to fuse the two forms, and the squad was soon integrated.79

Acceptable racial balance, Columbus schools quickly discovered, did not equal exemplary integration. The problems of desegregation's second generation were far more intricate than numbers could indicate, as Smith's story illustrates. Unforeseen and unspoken chasms frequently proved as damaging as outright racial antagonism. In the wake of implementation, said Damon Asbury, the schools were confronted with the often "frustrating" question, "Now that we've got the kids here, what do we do?"80
All too frequently, this question was left unanswered by harried administrators and discontented teachers. "The biggest problem," Smith said, "was just getting people attuned to the fact that we were desegregated. You had to understand that you had children being transported to your school that lived a distance away, who hadn't come there before, and that you had to consider them." Many principals and teachers, unable to adjust to the academic, economic, and racial diversity in their classrooms, either left or were nudged out of the system. Observed OSU desegregation scholar William Wayson, "Successful desegregation comes from staff commitment. The schools lacked the 'administrative climate' to make it work." 81

Mixing students did not necessarily mean mixing races, particularly at the higher grades. "You'd go to lunch," Principal Ed Willis said of East High School, "and what you'd see would be ten black tables, ten white tables, and four mixed tables. I'd like to tell you it was polka dot all the way, but it wasn't." 82 Student insecurity, meanwhile, combined with staff tension to produce a surge in discipline problems. The dilemma of racially disproportionate suspension, expulsion, and tracking statistics would prove particularly insoluble for the district, with whites often blaming unruly black students and blacks often faulting insensitive white teachers for the unequal numbers. 83 Frustrations were exacerbated as well by the logistical obstacles of busing: the multiple schedules and longer travel times that severed school loyalties, reduced extracurricular participation (and attendance), and further depressed already declining parental involvement.

All of these challenges were being faced on an inflation-ravaged budget by an embattled urban school system that had not passed an additional operating levy since 1968. The district was so destitute by the beginning of the 1980s that it could no longer afford to run a full list of its phone numbers in the local Yellow Pages. 84 With programming and staff slashed to state minimums, faculty morale reached its nadir. The difficulties of desegregation only heightened the hurdles created by out-of-date textbooks, deteriorating buildings, and inadequate equipment. 85
After 1979 saw the district’s fourth levy failure in as many years, school officials and chamber of commerce leaders devised a long-range campaign strategy directed at the 72 percent of the electorate who did not have children in the public schools. By luring voters without a firsthand knowledge of the system into individual buildings, administrators sought to combat commonly held assumptions about urban education. Said Superintendent Davis, “We find that public understanding of Columbus schools is based on national trends and national media coverage, rather than on actual conditions.” The aim of the campaign—called “See for Yourself”—was to demonstrate that Columbus schools were more than, in the words of Northland High principal Charles Pollack, “a glorified babysitting service.” During the yearlong effort, reported the New York Times, “almost 30,000 adults without children of their own in the public schools took advantage of [See for Yourself] to observe classes, go on trips with students, eat lunch with the youngsters, and participate in class discussions.”

See for Yourself was one of several factors that finally enabled the district in November 1981 to pass its first levy increase in thirteen years. The tax revolt of the 1970s had found its full expression in newly elected President Ronald Reagan. As a result, voters seemed to see less need to vent their anger at the convenient target of public education, particularly when presented with a convincing case of financial distress. Moreover, by November 1981, desegregation had come to be accepted as the status quo in Columbus. Antibusers offered no public opposition to the levy, and many voters who had previously used the ballot to protest busing had abandoned the city schools altogether. Their absence, combined with strong voter turnout in traditionally supportive areas, swung the election in the district’s favor.

While school officials recognized that the 7.6-mill levy merely allowed the system to “avoid bankruptcy,” its passage so soon after the beginning of desegregation further convinced local business leaders that busing’s last battle had been fought. Bragged chamber of commerce president Al Dietzel, “When we talk to business people
[from other cities], one of the first things we will tell them is that a very short time after we had busing and desegregation, we were able to pass a levy. I don't know any other school district in the nation that has been able to do that.” Before the end of his final term in 1983, Mayor Moody cautioned that such boosterism dangerously obscured the structural weaknesses of the Columbus Public Schools: “When you think of this city, which finally made a commitment to the public school system out of its pocketbooks, it made a commitment for survival, not for excellence. . . . You have to be terrified about our going into the future . . . because the future is in the minds and not the hands.”

Still, even if the 1981 levy was no panacea—the board had to shut down another ten schools the following spring—it at least gave the district a sense of stability for the first time in half a decade. This stability proved fortunate, as shortly after presiding over the emotional closing of tradition-rich Central High, Superintendent Joe Davis announced his resignation. Following a nationwide search, the board tabbed Jim Hyre, the short, stocky, self-deprecating superintendent of the Canton, Ohio, schools, to run the district.

Hyer, forty-one in 1982, entered teaching in the mid-1960s as an excuse to coach football. What he saw in Columbus was a school district desperately in need of a pep talk, an urban system not overwhelmed but underconfident. Desegregation and budget cuts had taken their toll, resigning a burned-out and often bitterly divided staff to a future of instructional inferiority. “The people had been through all the emotional battles,” said Hyre. “They were kind of worn out—mentally worn out—and that’s what I felt was the number one thing we had to talk about. I thought Columbus was a hell of a lot better than Columbus thought it was.”

With characteristic candidness, the new superintendent immediately went to work on district morale. The day after his first board meeting, Hyre scolded representatives from the Columbus Council of PTAs: “You people feel like a bunch of losers and it irritates the heck out of me,” he told them. “You’re beaten down by your counterparts in the suburbs about how good their schools are. Don’t be defensive about the school system.” Risking the wrath of the
Columbus Education Association, Hyre told teachers, "We are not in the business to create employment. We are here to educate children, and we have to do that...." If you don't believe in the district, then I think you should seek someplace else where you are happier."  

Hyre's exuberant candor was an invigorating change from the low-key, desk-bound leadership of Joe Davis. "Jim Hyre was a presence," recalled Ed Willis. "I remember the first meeting he had [with high school principals]. He said to us, 'I might lose this damned job, but if I do, a whole lot of you are going with me!'" During his first few months as superintendent, Hyre toured every school in the district, paid unannounced visits to surprised administrators, created the monthly Good Apple Awards to recognize outstanding employee effort, and tirelessly stumped the city preaching the gospel of confidence and quality. "Speech after speech," wrote Citizen-Journal reporter Debra Phillips, "he nearly exhausts himself trying to pound in the message to his audience: Hey, folks, the city schools aren't as bad as you think, and they're getting better."  

Hyre was convinced that perception equaled reality; if people came to believe Columbus had quality schools, Columbus would come to have quality schools. Part of his strategy was to focus public attention on the advantages of urban education without downplaying its drawbacks. To accomplish this goal, Hyre knew that he needed both the media and the business community on board. The press, quickly won over by the new superintendent's sense of humor and blunt quotability, was a pushover. Securing the support of the business community, however, was a more difficult matter. Hyre recalled, "One of the shocking pieces when I got [to Columbus] was that most of the business community was kind of like, 'Everything is going all right, so just leave it alone.'... There was no big business presence at all. I had to do a convincing job that the city school district had an impact upon the economics of the area. They really hadn't thought about it a lot. It wasn't anything that was on the front burner."  

To make urban education a priority, Hyre had to combat the disengagement of businesspeople from the city schools, a phenomenon
that was both a cause and a consequence of suburbanization, desegregation, and intensifying urban poverty; he dubbed this disease "315-itis" after Route 315, the newly completed freeway that linked downtown to Franklin County's affluent northwest side. "Most of the leadership in the business community," he said, "had no direct connection to the schools. Their kids didn't go to school there. They didn't live in Columbus anymore like they did in 1950, they lived in Upper Arlington or Dublin or Granville or wherever. And much of Columbus's business leadership is what I call 'new leadership.' The Limited, Wendy's—those kind of companies came up during the fifties, sixties, and seventies, and they didn't have the sense of community responsibility at that point in time they might have today."

Concurred Carole Williams, board president in 1981 and 1982, "At that time, the business community didn't pay any attention whatsoever to the city school district. Most of the business leadership were interested in the schools where their children were. It never really clicked that the city schools were producing the workforce—not so much the leadership in the workforce, but the workers."  

Hyre, however, had a unique talent for speaking the language of businesspeople while speaking the truth to them. He could play a round of golf with a group of city leaders one morning and then the next afternoon tell them that "the good old days are gone forever and are not coming back," as he did in a 1983 speech to the Columbus Metropolitan Club. To make his case that a good urban school district was a necessity, not a luxury, Hyre had to recouple the health of the city schools to the health of the city. "The more you talk about how great Columbus is, the more poor people will pack up and move to Columbus looking for a better life," he cautioned the Rotary Club in 1984. "Since you think it's so wonderful here, help me educate these people. If Columbus schools are strong, you'll have a strong central Ohio area." But, he added, echoing Rowland Brown's words almost a decade earlier, "the ostrich technique will not work. Poor people and blacks are not going away."  

Hyre's arrival in Columbus coincided with two critical events: an economic boom that fueled explosive growth in the defense, services,
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and FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) sectors of the economy; and a spate of studies that painted a devastating picture of America's educational competitiveness. While the school studies supplied the impetus for action, the economy provided the resources. Hyre's message, bolstered by an unusually compatible and cooperative school board, received an enthusiastic response from a new generation of energetic civic boosters bent on making Columbus a "world class city."99

The result was a series of private-public partnerships that extended business community involvement in the Columbus schools well beyond the traditional areas of levy campaign support and vocational education consultation.100 The district's Adopt-a-School program, initiated in April 1982, quickly grew from a small, pilot project consisting of a handful of schools to a systemwide, chamber-run enterprise involving hundreds of businesses and other organizations. In 1983, the school district and the business community joined forces with Ohio State to finance and coordinate SummerTech, a citywide computer education summer school. SummerTech gained national recognition for throwing open public school doors to provide affordable computer classes for the whole community.101 Also in 1983, local business leaders began the Columbus Public Schools Fund, an attempt to sidestep creativity-stifling bureaucracy by providing private grants for innovative, building-level programs. The CPS Fund blazed the trail for what would become the district's most successful business partnership, "I Know I Can," a multimillion-dollar endowment ensuring every Columbus graduate access to a college education.102

These programs made great public relations and represented an unprecedented level of direct private-sector involvement in the Columbus Public Schools. However, Hyre and other school officials realized that the district's momentum was not sustainable as long as those who could afford to avoid the district continued to do so. Ultimately, said Call and Post general manager Amos Lynch, the superintendent's goal was to make the system so good "that folks who impact on policy here and send their children to suburban and...
private schools" would want to get their kids back into the city district. Attracting and retaining the middle class thus became the Hyre administration's oft-stated objective.

The district already possessed one powerful middle-class magnet: its lottery-based alternative schools. Started in 1975, the alternative school program had grown gradually in size (from three to ten schools) and rapidly in popularity, leading to waiting lists that numbered in the hundreds. In 1983, a Hyre-appointed task force warned of the perception that "two separate and unequal school systems" were developing in Columbus, "wherein the alternative schools are viewed as superior to the conventional schools." The district was never able to erase this perception, nor did it necessarily want to. The alternative schools, with their carefully designed curricula, specially selected staffs, and actively involved parents, were widely regarded as the jewels of the system, a view reinforced by their strong test scores and higher per pupil expenses. For many middle-class parents, therefore, the continued enrollment of their children in the Columbus Public Schools hinged on the results of the spring lottery.

The success of the alternative schools no doubt helped to slow the district's middle-class enrollment slide. But slots were too few and lottery luck too uncertain for alternative schools alone to arrest the trend. Hyre and his board recognized that only substantial, structural investment in the city schools by Columbus's middle class could reverse the system's gradual decay. Their target thus became the development-desegregation nexus responsible for the district's moribund single-family housing market.

Throughout his tenure, Hyre stressed that class, not race, was the key determinant of educational achievement. "Test scores," he noted, "correlate to two factors: income level of families and educational level of families." Concentrated poverty generates a host of academic obstacles: family breakdown, violence, health problems, substance abuse, constant movement from school to school, institutional distrust, hopelessness. "The social problems of the world are
what urban schools wrestle with," Hyre said. "If every parent had a job and every family was middle class, most of the problems the schools have to wrestle with would go away." 106

But children in the Columbus Public Schools were gradually becoming poorer, in spite of the prosperity surrounding them. The proportion of AFDC students in the district had tripled between 1968 and 1984, rising from 11 percent to 33 percent. From 1980 to 1985, the percentage of children in the Columbus schools who qualified for free or reduced price meals grew from 47 percent to 59 percent. 107 Seventy percent of the district’s thirty thousand elementary school students received subsidized meals in 1984, and the figure reached 100 percent at seven Columbus primary schools that year. 108 Statistics from 1985–86 revealed that at all but three Columbus elementary and middle schools, one-third or more of the students received subsidized meals. 109 All too often, said Hyre, poor children “come from homes where the TV goes eighteen hours a day, but there are no written materials in the whole house. They start out behind . . . and some of them are always behind.” 110 Reaching a critical mass of such disadvantaged students, he argued, would undermine learning systemwide.

Yet as long as being black remained a disproportionate determinant of poverty, race and class could not be separated, a fact that Hyre confronted forthrightly. “We fight this constant image,” Hyre told Mayor Moody’s Economic Development Council, that “we have an awful lot of black people and an awful lot of poor people, so, therefore, we can’t be very much good. We still have a lot of latent racism. And I say that to you because you may as well deal with it because a lot of people don’t want to talk about it.” 111 He responded to the complaints of Clintonville residents about the uncertainties of the alternative-school lottery by admonishing them, “If you’re running from blacks, it won’t work. We’re supposed to solve the problems you ignore. A lot of our problems are perception problems. [Columbus Public Schools have] a second-class citizen mentality. Poor people and blacks are equated with inferiority. We’ve got to
deal with everybody.”  The reason middle-class whites shunned the district, Hyre contended, was “just fear. They don’t want their kids going to school with poor kids and black kids.”

Though Hyre held that desegregation helped maintain middle-class avoidance, the real villain, he believed, was the set of development assumptions that shaped residential segregation. “From day one,” he said, “I’ve always felt this: schools did not cause desegregation. The realtors had a hell of a lot more to do with it than the school people did. . . .” From firsthand experience, Hyre recognized that the presence of fair housing laws was often used as a smoke screen to shield the subtle tactics that perpetuated housing segregation. “I’ve talked to realtors who said they’re not responsible for that,” he noted, “but I know better than that. I mean, when I came to town, I had fifteen realtors either call me or write me letters. Almost to a person, they tried to sell me a house either in Upper Arlington or Worthington. Even though I was going to be the Columbus superintendent!”

When companies relocated jobs to Columbus, Beverly Gifford said, employees often “were counseled before they came and were told to stay away from the Columbus city schools.” “Most prospective home buyers moving into the Columbus area,” Hyre wrote to one real estate agent, “have been ‘pre-conditioned’ to purchase a home outside the Columbus district. It’s a situation that disturbs me greatly.” Only by persuading real estate interests that the city schools were no longer a residential development risk could Hyre and his school board win the race to stabilize the system. “Unless a strong partnership develops between the Columbus Public Schools and Columbus area realtors,” the superintendent warned, “the socioeconomic diversity, racial diversity, and intellectual diversity of our student body could change rapidly in the next few years.” “We are convinced,” Hyre stated in late 1984, “that realtors are the single most important group in determining the state of the Columbus school district.”

In a memo a few weeks later to Hyre and board president Stephen Eibling, board member Carole Williams asked, “Is 1985 the year
Columbus Public Schools gets serious about the problems we have with misperceptions about our school district among real estate agents and the buying public?" Williams's query quickly developed into "Selling to Sellers," a long-range marketing effort designed to "convince realtors that a quality education is available in the Columbus Public Schools" and to "convince developers that they can make money building homes in Columbus." School officials would "work with realtors, developers, personnel directors, city officials, and others to attract and retain a balanced population, including middle and upper class families with school-age children, to Columbus." The district's ultimate goal was to replace the assumption of urban inferiority with a perception of suburban parity, to persuade real estate agents, developers, and home buyers that, in public relations director Laura Ecklar's words, "There are sixteen fine school districts to choose from [in Franklin County]—and we're one of them!"

Three weeks after the board gave the go-ahead to "Selling to Sellers," the district's efforts to reclaim its middle-class credentials received a significant shot in the arm. On April 11, 1985, in one of his last acts before retiring from the bench, Robert Duncan released the Columbus schools from court jurisdiction. "In probability," the judge declared, "Columbus now has the most desegregated school system in the United States."

Duncan's final order captured the ambiguity of desegregation's legacy in Columbus. "There are no perfect remedial Court orders," it acknowledged. "All racial problems in the Columbus School District have not been eliminated by this litigation. Although the Court is satisfied that the remedy ordered in this case has substantially accomplished its objective, racial problems persist." The stubborn constancy of racially disproportionate discipline figures was particularly troubling to Duncan. Though the district was only 43.5 percent black in 1984–85, 66.8 percent of the students expelled were black, as were 56.2 percent of the students suspended. "Once the door is closed and you have twenty black students and twenty whites," said school board member Gary Holland, "there's
nothing to say that the teacher won't treat the blacks in an inferior way." Nevertheless, wrote Duncan, "alarming as the statistics are, there is no direct evidence that the results are causally related to any unlawful, improper, or even unprofessional acts or omissions of the defendant Columbus Board or its employees." Indeed, pre-desegregation figures exhibit similar racial disproportionality. "There is no evidence," the judge noted, "that the statistics showing disparity are significantly out of line for a large urban school district, even a district not undergoing school desegregation."  

The disparity in discipline figures, declared the court, merely tainted "an otherwise outstanding job of responding to an obligation to desegregate." In many ways, the district was healthier in 1985 than it was when busing began. Surveys found that both student and teacher attitudes toward desegregation had grown more positive annually. Community perception of the district had also improved significantly. Asked to grade the Columbus schools, 41 percent of survey respondents in 1985 gave them an "A" or "B," compared to just 27 percent in 1981. Moreover, the percentage of those surveyed who viewed "desegregation/busing" as "the biggest problem facing the Columbus Public Schools today" dropped from 38 percent to 14.9 percent during that time. Meanwhile, student attendance was creeping higher, the district's fiscal footing was far more sound, and enrollment decline, considerably less than originally projected, had virtually ceased by 1985.  

Most important, Duncan observed, "a comparison of April 1984 data with predesegregation shows that if desegregation has had an impact upon achievement in Columbus schools, in the long run that impact has been a positive one." Test scores for elementary and middle school students were generally on the rise, and "black student performance continued to increase at all levels," even though, Special Master Luvern Cunningham noted, "outmigrating kids were generally brighter by one grade and inmigrating kids were less bright by one grade." Between 1980 to 1985, the SAT scores of the district's high schoolers improved, while ACT results held steady. Given the commonly held perception of a "basic inconsistency or unbearable
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tension between school desegregation and quality education,” the district’s educational data demonstrated, Duncan wrote, that the “defendants have had significant success in doing what many view as impossible.”

A systematic study of the impact of court-ordered desegregation in Columbus is beyond the scope of this book. Given the available statistical and anecdotal evidence, however, it is clear that the district’s six years under court control were neither the panacea that some sought nor the catastrophe that others predicted. The intangible virtues of integration may well have been neutralized by the practical dilemmas of desegregation, problems such as intraschool academic and social segregation, loosened community bonds, and lessened parental involvement. Likewise, any educational benefits or innovations that desegregation might have brought were threatened by the accompanying rise in discipline problems and decline in middle-class enrollment. Ultimately, court-ordered desegregation may have done little more than take advantages and disadvantages once concentrated in specific schools and disperse them throughout the system. It is perhaps best, then, to describe the district as healthier in 1985 than in 1979, yet more vulnerable.

Finally free of court control, school board members publicly responded to Duncan’s action by firmly reasserting their “legal and moral obligation . . . to operate [the] district as a unitary district.” Privately, however, conversations about revisiting and revamping the student assignment plan had already begun. “I can’t tell you that there will never be changes,” board president Eibling hinted the day of court release. “If there is a chance to provide better educational opportunities for every youngster in the district, we’ll do it.” In other words, if the board could find a politically and legally permissible way to reduce busing, it would.

By late 1985, the board had remained largely silent on the issue. “Pressures have been mounting,” stated a December Citizen-Journal editorial, “for the school board to make some moves to lessen the burden of cross-town busing and to do more to keep middle class white students in the city system.” Shortly thereafter, the board
acted, unveiling a tentative elementary restructuring plan that would enhance student assignment continuity, add alternative schools, and reduce transportation for racial balance. While the actual plan would not be approved and implemented until 1987, its announcement sent a carefully timed signal to Columbus’s white middle class that the district was serious about curtailing busing.

As 1986 began and the end of the third annexation moratorium approached, the district appeared to be experiencing a renaissance. City leaders applauded when Hyre announced, “I am proud to claim we are the best urban school system in America—and we can be better!” “They wanted to believe it,” said Urban League executive director Sam Gresham, “but they knew better. People all along knew that it wasn’t.” For the boosterish business community that drove Columbus’s growth consensus, however, the veneer of educational quality was more important than the reality beneath; while the price of fixing the district was prohibitive, the cost of fixing the district’s image was minimal. Urban school districts were supposed to be dying—that Columbus’s appeared alive and well was just an added plus for the city’s already sparkling marketing portfolio. “Cities are defined, at least in part, by a perception of the quality of their public schools,” declared a Dispatch editorial. “The [Columbus] school system can be a talking point, rather than a negative factor, for recruiters trying to lure young executives to Columbus. . . . The public schools are becoming another asset of a city on the grow.”

Amid the city’s heady prosperity, meanwhile, Hyre’s more sobering messages fell on deaf ears. Upon arriving in Columbus in 1982, the new superintendent had declared that “there is an opportunity on the horizon now that was not here five years ago and may not be here five years from now.” By 1986, that opportunity still existed. But with youth violence starting to rise, pockets of urban poverty intensifying, and the school system serving an increasingly hard-to-educate population, it was beginning to fade; without a far-reaching commitment to the district from local business and development interests, it would soon disappear. “Can we develop something that is different than the Cleveland and St. Louis model, where all the
upper- and middle-class people first bail out of the school system and then the city proper?” Hyre wondered in 1985. “I don’t know.” Still, he maintained in a speech to the Building Industry Association, “We have a window of opportunity. Isolation or ‘moving out’ will not solve anything.”

That window, however, was starting to slam shut. “Hyre was a real pro in terms of public relations and getting people to feel good about their [school] system,” said city council president Jerry Hammond. “But it wasn’t enough to move the developers to the degree they needed to be moved.” In Columbus, said Development Department planning administrator Steve McClary, “You’ve got three types of population: you’ve got people that are in the Columbus school district and have no choice; you have people who choose to be in the Columbus school district; and then you have people who have chosen not to be in the Columbus school district. What Jim Hyre did was instill some pride at least to those already committed to the whole concept of the Columbus schools. But I’m not sure he did a whole lot to convince people outside the schools that they should give them a try.” As it turned out, neither the perception nor the reality of the Columbus schools had reached the levels needed to inspire investment. In the end, not even the self-proclaimed “best urban school system in America” could make desegregation compatible with residential development.

“The Horses Are Out of the Barn”: Annexation, Win-Win, and Educational NIMBY

In February 1986, Franklin County superintendents imported Miami-based conflict resolution expert Irving Goldaber to mediate annexation negotiations. Emotions were running high on both sides of the Columbus school system’s boundaries, with suburbanites shouting “Democracy!” city supporters crying “Race!” and everyone screaming “Money!” As the November 30 expiration of the third annexation
moratorium drew near, the decades-old school land transfer controversy had reached a level of hostility altogether consistent with the highlights of Goldaber's résumé: urban riot control, hostage negotiations, Philadelphia's MOVE organization, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland. As Columbus City Council president Jerry Hammond put it, "The political reality [of annexation] was that you have your hands on the testicles of the world if you start playing with this."  

With three annexation bills pending yet no resolution in sight, exasperated state legislators urged superintendents from the twelve Franklin County school districts with territory in Columbus to solve the volatile issue themselves. "Nothing leads me to believe that the General Assembly will accomplish in the next seventy-five days what it has not accomplished in the last five years," groaned state representative Mike Stinziano, a Columbus Democrat. "With the possibility of the last of the moratoriums expiring in 1986," recalled Bob Barrow, the Columbus schools' government lobbyist, "the legislature said, 'There are not going to be any more moratoriums. And since it's a local problem mostly in Franklin County and the Columbus area, you folks figure it out. Whatever you figure out, we'll enact a law to allow you to do it.'"  

After reading about Goldaber's successful mediation of a teacher contract dispute in Worthington, Stinziano sent a letter to Franklin County superintendents and legislators proposing that they give the sociologist's approach a try. Goldaber's "win-win" negotiation technique, an intensive, thirty-day bargaining process premised on trust, concession, and an unwavering commitment to conciliation, had a near-perfect record for resolving school labor disagreements. Impressed by Goldaber's credentials, the superintendents concluded that win-win's finite parameters offered the best hope for resolving what Stinziano in 1987 called "the most divisive issue in central Ohio in the past twenty-five years." The sociologist was hired in early March 1986, and negotiations were scheduled to begin April 2.  

By the time Goldaber arrived in Columbus, months of uncer-
tainty had thoroughly agitated the hornet’s nest of suburban territorialism. Terrified of losing their children and their tax base to the city district, residents in suburban school systems regarded the Columbus board as, in the words of a Dispatch reporter, “seven Cyclopes, drooling as they cast their single, envious eyes in one direction: suburban property.” “Those districts are so afraid of Columbus it’s ridiculous,” said board president Loretta Heard. “They’ve been afraid to even meet with us, because they think we’re out to get them.” One antiannexation rally drew over twelve hundred people, and hundreds more packed every legislative hearing on the issue. “When I’d get up to testify,” remembered Barrow, “there was booing and hissing in the background. You’d get threatened in the elevators. It was bizarre.” Said board member Pauline Radebaugh, “I would get calls starting at six in the morning, and quite often I’ve had calls, 11:30, 12:00 at night—people from suburban areas calling, threatening. You know, ‘We’ll get even with you because . . . we don’t want our kids in Columbus schools. We want to stay in a good school system.’” Westerville board member Tom Fawcett best summarized the suburban perspective when he proclaimed: “We have everything they want, they have nothing we want.”

The aggressive rhetoric of Columbus school board member James Ebright only magnified suburban anxiety. During his two years on the board, Ebright emerged as annexation’s lone crusader, insistently emphasizing the racial and economic consequences of the common areas. “Nothing is going to keep the white middle class in the district as long as we keep the current boundaries,” he contended. “The net result is a resegregated school system, where the poor and blacks go to Columbus Public Schools and the middle-class whites go to school in the suburbs. [But] the board is unwilling to do anything about it because it’s a politically unpopular issue.”

Hearings he held on the issue in 1985 galvanized the support of a small group of mostly white, liberal Columbus parents, who established an annexation advocacy group called the Apple Alliance.

Ebright remained an annexation gadfly even after stepping down from the board in mid-1985 to tend to his collapsing marriage and
failing computer software firm. At a Columbus Metropolitan Club debate in late 1985, he denounced proposed legislation giving residents the right to veto school territory transfers as “the kind of democracy you find in South Africa, where only white people vote. It’s extremely bad educational policy to confine all the poor and minority students to one school district and then deprive that district of all the resources it needs,” he added.141

Columbus board members took pains to distance themselves from Ebright. Even Gary Holland, his most ideologically compatible boardmate, complained that Ebright’s crusade was “creating a certain paranoia in the Franklin County area.” The bulk of the Columbus board at the time believed that annexation was either educationally unnecessary, financially undesirable, or politically unrealizable.142 Still, said Gahanna-Jefferson superintendent Roger Viers, Ebright “created some nervousness and anxiousness on the part of suburban districts. He was a renegade. And you say, ‘He’s probably just a renegade.’ But, then, you never know.” Suburban suspicions were stoked in early February when the Columbus board approved a resolution endorsing the principle of coterminous boundaries. Though board members repeatedly emphasized that it was merely a “negotiating position,” not a “basis for action,” the resolution alarmed suburban residents. “We must insist that we keep the boundaries as they are, because we want to keep not only our students but also our tax base,” stated Dorothy Young, chair of the Coalition for Local School Systems (CLASS), an areawide antiannexation group. With tension and mistrust escalating, the chances of a settlement seemed as remote as ever. “There was a bloodbath in the making,” recalled Groveport-Madison superintendent Charles Barr. “We had people out here in this district that were ready to go down and take the Statehouse apart, brick by brick.”143

Sitting down at the same table for the first time, however, to begin what the Call and Post called “the most important multilateral negotiations in Franklin County since Franklinton merged with Columbus [in 1870],” the superintendents concluded that resolving their dispute was both possible and imperative. “There was a spirit
of cooperation that we haven't seen before on this issue," Hamilton Local superintendent Mark O. Stevens said after a January 30 introductory meeting. "Everyone seemed willing to compromise. The gun is to our heads." A self-imposed news blackout allowed the superintendents and their staffs to negotiate in the eye of the storm surrounding them. And with so much at stake—40 percent of the city of Columbus (72 square miles), 19.6 percent of its students (16,586), 21 percent of its property tax base ($43.7 million per year), and land valued at $1.1 billion—the rhetorical winds were fierce. In the six years since the imposition of the first moratorium, residential and commercial construction in the common areas had boomed, making the territory that much more valuable and annexation that much more volatile. Suburban districts also feared losing major industrial taxpayers and potentially lucrative undeveloped land to the Columbus schools. Table 1 shows what each affected district had at stake in the common areas.

Yet, even with antiannexation groups from suburban districts stepping up their six-year war, and Columbus's Apple Alliance emerging as an organized protransfer force, city leaders remained largely silent about the emotional issue. In 1986, the economy of the seven-county Columbus metropolitan area was booming: 65,000 jobs had been created in three years; Franklin County's unemployment rate stood at 5.5 percent, well below the state (8.1 percent) and national (7 percent) averages; and tangible personal property had grown 71 percent countywide between 1980 and 1985, a far higher rate than the 33 percent growth statewide. Over $500 million worth of construction had taken place downtown since 1979, and a gleaming skyline was emerging on the banks of the Scioto. Home building, meanwhile, hit its 1980s apex, as four times more residential building permits were issued in Franklin County during 1986 than during the recession year of 1982.

Focused on developing the city's downtown and promoting the area's vibrant image, business leaders did not want the disruption and hostility of a racially loaded, interjurisdictional brawl. While they favored the preservation of the school district status quo to
Table 1. Status of common-area school districts, 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Franklin County School District</th>
<th>Tax Base ($/year)</th>
<th>Tax Base (%)</th>
<th>Area (sq. mi.)</th>
<th>Students (no.)</th>
<th>Students (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>3,200,000</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>2,023</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gahanna-Jefferson</td>
<td>2,600,000</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groveport Madison</td>
<td>2,300,000</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>2,877</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton Local</td>
<td>167,000</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilliard</td>
<td>3,900,000</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickerington</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain Local</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reynoldsburg</td>
<td>457,000</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-Western</td>
<td>5,900,000</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westerville</td>
<td>4,000,000</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2,779</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthington*</td>
<td>9,600,000</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>2,856</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Worthington was protected by its 1968 boundary agreement with Columbus.


The animosity sure to be engendered by annexation, reaching a quick, quiet resolution was once again top priority.152 “The business community in general did not like the controversy and the conflict between Columbus and its suburban neighbors,” Barrow said. “It's very hard for people involved in economic development to get companies to come to an area where you have some of your major political entities in a state of civil war.” Business leaders, agreed Hyre, “knew that it was a very volatile issue. They just wanted it solved.”153

Initially, even those in the business community with the most at stake—home builders and residential real estate development interests—remained in the background, fearing a surge of panic selling and market flight.154 They simply had too much invested, however, to stay silent for long. The common areas contained 80 percent of the city's new construction, including much of its industrial and com-
Like Squeezing the Center of a Balloon

mercial growth and virtually all of its new residential development. Land investor Thomas Lurie reported that out of 1,826 single-family building permits issued in Columbus in 1985, only 18 were in the Columbus school district. Accelerated by the completion of Route 315, runaway growth on Columbus's northwestern periph­ery overwhelmed existing services, creating headache-inducing traffic woes and monopolizing the attention of City Hall. As this haphazard expansion proceeded, rising property tax valuation and surging student enrollment became increasingly concentrated in the common areas.

For real estate agents, the looming threat of annexation cast a shadow of uncertainty over the local market. But real estate agents only sold homes, they did not build them; concerned about controversy, not long-term capital investment, they sought only to avoid fanning the flames of the dispute. “We’re basically taking a hands-off position,” said George Simpson, president of the Columbus Board of Realtors and head of Ohio Equities. Debbie Briner, a reporter for the Suburban News Publications, wrote that “several real estate agents . . . refused to comment on how annexation might affect property values. Many said that it is an issue that is ‘too hot’ to speculate about.” With several strong existing home markets within the city school system—Clintonville, German Village, Berwick, Victorian Village—real estate agents even took the time to sing the district’s praises. “People are becoming more [accepting of] the so-called integrated school,” realtor George Smith told Briner. “So many things have improved. We’re just thankful to have a Jim Hyre. I say he’s as good for Columbus as [zoo director and frequent national talk show guest] Jack Hanna, only Hanna gets more ink.”

Builders and developers, however, had to ensure that their investments in land and construction would fetch profitable market rates. If the common areas were suddenly transferred into the city school district, both the demand for and the value of their unsold properties would plunge. “That uncertainty,” said Weiler, “caused the developers to be very unhappy. You had a situation where you might start off in the Westerville schools, but we don’t know if after
a couple years you may be coming to Columbus. From the development side, if I want to attract a builder of homes, that builder wants to be able to tell the families purchasing the house, 'Your kid will go to such and such school and I can give you confidence that if he starts [there] in first grade, he'll stay there.'"  

Hoping to raise $4,000 to lobby key legislators, Jim Sutliff, president of the local Building Industry Association (BIA), solicited the BIA's six hundred members for donations to its political action committee. "A few hundred dollars does attract attention," he wrote. "We certainly can't buy anybody. We can only give a small contribution to let them know we're here and get five minutes of their time. Our developers have a lot of land in those [common] areas and paid a premium price for land in a school district. If the land changes districts the value may change. The unknown is bad for everybody."  

As win-win negotiations wore on, builders and developers became more vocal, their rhetoric more threatening. Martin Graff, executive director of the BIA, warned that residential development in Columbus would "screech to a halt" if the city schools sought transfer of the common areas. "People in Columbus but in suburban districts are afraid they may be annexed, so they're trying to move out," Graff stated. "There is no demand among new home buyers to live in the Columbus school district." Sutliff predicted a mass exodus from sections of the city served by suburban schools: "People in those gray areas are going to be looking to get out. They may have had ideas of moving and now they'll do it. If you allow unrestricted annexation, growth in the suburbs will be astronomical."  

Builders had already seen "a reduction in [home buying] traffic" in annexable areas, Sutliff claimed. In a comment somewhere between prediction and threat, developer Charlie Ruma, owner of Virginia Homes, said, "As we get down to [the end of the moratorium in] November and if the issue is not resolved, we will not sell a house in any district outside of the suburban school districts." Without a resolution, he warned, housing starts in Columbus would drop 80 percent in 1986 alone.
Apple Alliance spokesperson Martha Crossen condemned such dire comments, calling them “sensationalistic, divisive threats” insulting to the city schools. Crossen also accused the development community of having a hidden hand in the market’s shift to suburban schools: “Developers can’t tell if there’s a demand or not because they don’t build in the Columbus district. They’ve created their own problems because they advertise homes based on the district they’re in with the inference that other school districts are better than Columbus. They have largely contributed to the perception that you’re going to lose out if you buy into the Columbus system.”

But with a 7.94-mill levy on the May 6 ballot, Columbus school officials were far more delicate. Administrator Tim Ilg told a fifty-member East Side Realtors association, “I do not expect you to be salespeople for the Columbus Public Schools. That’s our job.” A resounding levy victory, the most decisive since 1965, indicated that the district’s efforts were meeting with success. At a buoyant victory party that night, Mayor Buck Rinehart hugged board president Loretta Heard and exclaimed, “We’ve only just begun! We’re on a roll!”

To underscore this enthusiasm, six “For Sale” signs prominently displaying “Columbus Schools” popped up in Clintonville the following week. District spokesperson Laura Ecklar said they were the first such signs since real estate agents began promoting specific school systems in the mid-1970s. “It’s really wonderful,” Ecklar glowed. “It’s a nice first step.” The real estate agent, Pat Kearns-Davis of ReMax, explained, “We need to let people know Columbus schools are just as good as other schools. We’re not afraid to say, ‘This is Columbus schools, and your kids will go here.’ I get tired of people complaining about Columbus schools. I say, instead of complaining, let’s promote them. Making people believe in Columbus schools can only help attract industry and business into the city. This will help the whole community.” “You made my day!” an exuberant Hyre wrote Kearns-Davis. “Your willingness to support and promote the Columbus Public Schools in such a visible way marks a major milestone in your profession—and in this community.”
That such a "milestone" could even make headlines, however, revealed the fragility of the district's high-profile momentum. For several years, Jim Hyre had been playing a game of high-stakes poker, with the Columbus Public School District as his hand. The reward was the region's pool of middle-class students, particularly its white middle-class students. Ultimately, Hyre knew, he would have to reveal his cards, but by bluffing, stalling, and extolling the virtues of the hand he held, he hoped that just maybe he could outlast his opposition: the automatic equation of urban education with inferiority. By 1986, Hyre's hand was surprisingly strong—a financially stable city system with some excellent programs, a number of fine schools, and, fleetingly, an integrated, racially and economically diverse student body. From the beginning, however, the deck had been stacked, and the rules slanted against him. And after the Win-Win Agreement was announced on May 15, it became painfully clear that the hand Hyre held was no match for that of his powerful foe. When the cards were finally thrown down, the opponent walked off with the pot, leaving Hyre to place a final, futile bet on an uncertain future.

Win-win negotiations began on April 2, with the twelve participating superintendents seated around a circular table in a conference room at Ohio State. The multiple representatives were quickly consolidated to two negotiating parties, Columbus and the collective suburbs. As the superintendents took turns rattling off their concerns, dozens of issues were compressed into a pair of fundamental dilemmas: what to do about the common areas and what to do about future annexations. Administrative subcommittees were then formed and given six weeks to research relevant issues and hammer out specific compromises. At the end of the six weeks, the superintendents reconvened for three marathon bargaining sessions, during which the final form of the Win-Win Agreement was forged.

The agreement that emerged contained three key elements: (1) Existing school district boundaries were made permanent, (2) unincorporated land annexed to the city of Columbus in the future
would be automatically transferred to the Columbus Public School District, and (3) tax revenues from new commercial and industrial development in the common areas would be shared by Columbus and the suburban district involved.

In short, the suburban districts got to keep their students and their tax base, while the city schools were guaranteed the territory brought into Columbus by future annexations as well as a cut from any new construction in the common areas. Under pressure from a state legislature eager to adjourn for the summer, the participating school boards ratified the agreement with minimal debate. Franklin County lawmakers then incorporated it into a pending annexation bill and quickly rammed it through the General Assembly.

Suburban residents and school officials greeted Win-Win with barely tempered glee. By solidifying existing boundaries, the agreement lifted the cloud of uncertainty that for so long had loomed over the common areas. "What the suburban districts got was stability," said Gahanna-Jefferson superintendent Roger Viers, head of the suburban delegation during the negotiating process, "and that was our concern. We had to have stability." That this stability was achieved without the sacrifice of a single pupil or existing revenue source made the agreement even sweeter for the suburbs. "We saved every dollar and every student!" exulted Hilliard board vice president Thomas Calhoon. Politicians and business leaders expressed relief that the intractable territory transfer issue had finally been resolved. The Dispatch called Win-Win a "workable, equitable annexation policy" that "embodie[d] the goal that all those involved kept in mind: the economic stability of the Franklin County school districts." Real estate interests were especially glad to have the controversy behind them. Said Donald Borror, chair of the Borror Corporation, a large local housing development firm, "I applaud the officials who made the effort and had the resolve to tackle a very difficult issue."

Hyre, meanwhile, was thoroughly convinced that his school district had reached the best agreement available to it. From the beginning, he saw that only a long, divisive, and probably fruitless legal
struggle could wrest the common areas from Columbus's suburban counterparts. Having only recently concluded more than twelve years of desegregation litigation, Columbus, he said, "wasn't willing to fight that battle."¹⁷⁴ "The difficulty was how you were ever going to bring about any kind of different result," said Barrow. "It was pretty clear to us that we were not going to get support from the State Board of Education to transfer all those lands to Columbus. If somebody can figure out how to get them into Columbus, I'm pleased to do it. But I can tell you, no elected state judge is going to do it and no state board of education, in my opinion, is going to take that step. I think the only way it was going to happen was through some kind of federal court intervention. And, frankly, in recent years it doesn't seem to be that the federal courts are much interested in jumping into those kinds of areas." Judging from the housing market's response to Penick, there was ample reason to believe that even a successful annexation effort would fail to capture the middle class. "People would just move out further," said Weiler. "It would be a bonanza for the Dublin market because everybody would be running to get into it." Agreed Rich Fahey, a Columbus attorney who worked on Win-Win and then served on the school board from 1986 to 1993, "The political reality of it is that it would probably be ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years of heated legal battles, and by the time you're done tearing everything apart, I'm not sure you wouldn't end up with a system of one of the finest sets of private schools in the United States."¹⁷⁵

Essentially, said Barrow, the district was "trading the present for the future." Win-Win did not force the system to concede anything it already had, and the schools were guaranteed new revenue from any future Columbus development. "We didn't give away one darn thing," Hyre declared.¹⁷⁶ "The fact is, we started with absolutely 'o' and we came away with about $1 million a year in shared revenue plus an agreement that when any [territory] is annexed to Columbus, it automatically becomes part of the Columbus school district." Said Weiler, "Call it ransom, call it anything you want, but Columbus got money for allowing the kids to stay where they are. I
guess it’s kind of like ‘the horses are out of the barn.’ You’re better off putting a new lock on now and letting the horses go than not having a lock at all. The point is, if you know you can’t win, do you finally reach a situation where you say ‘let’s look forward instead of backward’?”

Moreover, Hyre and his school board were riding a wave of confidence at the time, a feeling heightened by the district’s convincing 1986 levy victory. Despite the hostile rhetoric of developers and builders, the superintendent truly trusted that their reluctance to invest in the Columbus school district would eventually dissolve. “I think Jim Hyre absolutely believed that,” said Viers. “I think he felt that the Columbus school system was going to be a high-quality urban school district under his leadership, that he was going to be able to do certain things, and that, why not? Why wouldn’t people want to buy homes in the Columbus school district if it was indeed a top notch urban school district?” “Jim believed the development would happen within the Columbus city school boundaries,” concurred Columbus board member Gary Holland. But, Holland added, “he knew it was up to the developers to make it happen.”

It was Hyre’s faith in this uncertain future that drew the ire of Columbus school supporters. “Everything that’s offered to Columbus is totally speculative, everything that the suburbs wanted and primarily got is concrete,” said Martha Crossen of the Apple Alliance. “[Win-Win is] a double slap in the face of Columbus. We don’t get any students, [and] we don’t get any land.” James Ebright called the agreement “the closest thing to a complete capitulation to the suburbs that I could have possibly imagined.” Outspoken board member Bill Moss derided it as “a fantastic, unmitigated sellout,” “terrible,” “sickening,” and “foul.” And the Call and Post wondered “how the school system can focus so hard on protecting the interests of the affluent students in Reynoldsburg, Worthington, Westerville, Dublin, Gahanna, and Upper Arlington—which have some of the highest per capita incomes in the state—while neglecting to find a dime for the education of poor Black children in Columbus.”
Win-Win's detractors did not share Hyre's hope that the city school district would get its fair share of future development. "Builders and developers have made it painfully and publicly clear," Crossen noted, "that there will be no residential development in the Columbus Public School District now or in the future. So we won't get any students there to speak of and for practical purposes there won't be much land annexed anyway." The agreement, critics contended, preserved the ability of suburban residents to stay "safe" in the common areas yet maintain access to city services. "What ticks me off," Columbus City Council president Jerry Hammond said, "is that they use your resources—your infrastructure, your water and your sewer, your Outerbelt and your Innerbelt, your jobs, your airport—and they beat the hell out of you." "Columbus taxpayers are subsidizing the suburban school districts," asserted State Representative Otto Beatty, a black Columbus Democrat who had played a prominent role in annexation's legislative battles. "[Win-Win] takes from the poor and gives to the rich." With Win-Win, influential development attorney Harrison Smith said, school officials "permanentized the dislocation of most of the upper-middle-class population of Columbus. They created a duality in citizenship." Lacking the stomach to stand up to the suburbs, Columbus officials, critics claimed, yielded to their counterparts' lone demand, getting only empty promises and some token cash as compensation. "Hyre and six board members wanted to avoid a fight at almost any cost," wrote reporter Herb Cook Jr. "The 'compromise' almost surely ensures that the city's schools will become blacker and poorer. . . . They should have called them win-wimp negotiations for all the good they did the city schools." 

The hollow irony of Win-Win was that both Hyre and his detractors were right. If the district failed to gain anything from the agreement to arrest its inexorable impoverishment, it was not because of a failure to fight, but because the battle had already been lost. In all probability, Hyre got about as much out of the deal as he could have, and therein lay its relevance. For the city schools, Win-Win was nei-
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ther a financial triumph nor an educational tragedy. More than anything else, it was a symbolic milestone: the formal declaration of the Columbus Public School District’s second-class status.

Win-Win embodied the catch-22 that had come to characterize the Columbus schools. District officials knew that in order to sustain the long-term educational viability of the system, they needed all of the resources represented by the common areas: an expanding tax base, stable middle-class families, political clout, the children of local civic leaders, educational and extracurricular amenities, parental involvement, access to job networks, and so on. But the lack of these resources is precisely what made pursuing them so quixotic. Well before Win-Win negotiations began, Jim Hyre fully understood the obstacles arrayed against his increasingly poor, increasingly African American, and still desegregated district. Any effort to secure the common areas would incur the wrath of suburban residents, the hostility of state legislators, the resistance of the Ohio Board of Education, the icy opposition of local business leaders, and the paralyzed silence of a city hall balancing divided constituencies. Given the growth consensus that governed Columbus politics, the emergence of a school board willing to pursue such an effort was virtually unthinkable.

These political pressures would affect any attempted legal push as well. The district’s main weapon, the threat of a metropolitan desegregation suit, offered the unappetizing prospect of another lengthy, vitriolic court battle, one with only a limited chance of success. Moreover, the response of the residential development community to Penick had vividly demonstrated the elusiveness and flexibility of the structures that sustained educational inequality. Without the unlikely backing of business and political leaders, a metropolitan remedy risked driving development out of the county and sparking a rush to private schools.

Crucially, Hyre had no notable grassroots support to use as pro-annexation leverage. The Apple Alliance made some noise, but its constituency seemed from the start a limited one: urban white liberals
with children in the Columbus schools. Far more significant—and especially revealing—was the relative silence of the African American community throughout the annexation debate. While suburbanites noisily mobilized to protect the status quo, city blacks evinced little passion for the issue. Though that may have been a sign of quiet faith in Franklin County's black legislative delegation, it was much more likely an indication of the black community's century-old ambivalence toward integration itself.

The ideal of integration had long been tarnished by the reality of desegregation, in Columbus and nationwide. Intended to increase black access to educational resources, desegregation instead often seemed to dilute black control over them. African American children in Columbus were being disproportionately disciplined and tracked, and they were dropping out all too frequently, yet the district's public focus—its alternative-school program in particular—seemed directed predominantly at the white middle class. Instead of distributing investment around the district, desegregation largely seemed to be driving it away. Increasingly, the product of *Penick* looked to be not equal access to abundant resources, but insufficient control over inadequate resources. Given the fierce suburban resistance to any encroachment on the common areas, blacks held little faith that annexation could solve either problem. Bringing thousands of resentful families involuntarily into the city schools hardly seemed an educational panacea for the children already there.

At the same time, however, most African Americans maintained a lingering faith in integration, a faith buttressed by the reality of segregation's inevitable economic limitations. And so, while the lack of active black support for pursuing the common areas was likely the result of annexation's uncertain consequences, the vocal criticism that the Win-Win Agreement itself engendered can be read as a reaction to the racial and economic inequality it symbolically sanctioned. The pressing question of the Columbus schools thus mirrored the postdesegregation dilemma of black Columbus: Can we sur-
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vive on our own, without access to the resources around us? For both, the understandable hope was "yes," while the underlying reality was "no."

With Win-Win, response to the possibility of Columbus school territory transfer once again proved the measure of the city district's relative status. The agreement left little doubt that by 1986 the scales had shifted completely in favor of suburban schools, with no sign of tilting back. The increasingly hysterical response of suburban school district residents to urban education, meanwhile, indicated that a more ominous transformation had taken place.

Between 1970 and 1980, the city school system had gone from being essential to residential development in Columbus to being incompatible with it. The furor that preceded Win-Win, however, signaled the rise of an even darker perception of the Columbus Public School system, marking the triumph of a kind of educational NIMBY in Columbus. The city school district as a whole, despite being dubbed "the best urban system in the country," had come to be seen as not just inferior but actually noxious, a threat to the sanctity of suburbs, the safety of suburban children, and the security of suburban property values. As such, it was little different from a prison, a toxic waste storage site, a paint factory, or a sewage treatment plant. As with these other development hazards, nobody questioned the need for the services a city school system provided, as long as the dangers such a system symbolized—race, poverty, violence, and irresponsibility—remained reliably self-contained and safely distant. The prospect of annexation, however, threatened to dismantle the protective walls that had been invisibly erected around the Columbus schools. Suburban response to this danger was identical to what the reaction would have been to plans being announced for a federal correctional facility in Dublin, or a trash-burning power plant in Worthington. With the tacit blessing of city leaders, angry residents formed committed grassroots groups, held well-attended protests, and pressured sympathetic public officials in a display of defensive activism as swift and furious as it was effective. The poisons they
were protesting were neither chemicals nor criminals, however, but children. Given the worsening disparity in resources between Columbus and the suburban school systems, this rejection offered a somber eulogy for school desegregation and sent a chilling message about the feasibility of future attempts to ensure equal educational opportunity.