

Transcript

563: The Problem We All Live With - Part Two

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Prologue

Ira Glass

Kiana Jackson is a kid who frequently scans the room for a more exciting option than what is right in front of her. So of course she was the first to notice a regular day, freshman year, high school, when something exciting did happen.

KIANA JACKSON: I remember I was sitting in lunchroom and I saw a bunch of kids that I knew for sure they did not go to our school because they were white kids and there is no white kids in our school. And then I'm a really social person, so I see these kids. I was like, "OK, they do not go here. What are they doing here? I want to find out."

Ira Glass

The kids were visiting from private school just up the road, part of an exchange program between the two schools that one of our producers, Chana Joffe-Walt, did some reporting on that ran here on our program a few months ago. When we started putting together this week's radio show, Chana thought Kiana had to be on it. Hey there, Chana.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Hello.

Ira Glass

So why did you want her for this show?

Chana Joffe-Walt

I mean, partly I wanted her for this show because of this moment right here and how Kiana handled it. Kiana is super charming. She's just sheer enthusiasm. She's a Latina kid in school and she sees a bunch of kids who don't look like anyone else in the cafeteria and she is not suspicious, or shy, or mean. She is just excited. She runs toward their table.

KIANA JACKSON: So I was just like, "Oh my gosh." So I went over and I was like, "I'm going to talk to them and eat lunch with them." So I just sat there and starting to talking to them. Like, "Yeah, this is our school." It was so exciting.

Chana Joffe-Walt

And then the thing that Kiana said to me was actually something she said way later at her graduation, at her high school graduation. I asked if she kept in touch with any of the kids she met in this program. Are you still in touch with anybody?

KIANA JACKSON: I have a lot of them on Instagram and Facebook, so we're constantly commenting on pictures. "Oh my god, your prom was so nice. Your prom was so nice too." And we told them, "Oh, whenever you guys have one of your fests, let us know." And they were like, "Yeah, you guys will come to our fests for sure."

Ira Glass

Fests?

Chana Joffe-Walt

Yeah, the fests are apparently these parties that the private school kids have, and Kiana told me they'll rent out a private club in Manhattan and--

KIANA JACKSON: This insane party, and they're like white kid wasted. So we just want to see how it is. Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Chana Joffe-Walt

What's "white kid wasted" mean?

Man

I don't know.

KIANA JACKSON: It's parties that we haven't experienced.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Kiana paused after this, thought about it more, and finally said, "I don't know. I don't know what white wasted is. That's why I want to go. I want to see what that looks like."

So I've thought about this moment many times since then, because it's weird, right? Kiana is a New Yorker. She grew up in New York City, where there are something like four million white people, and she had never had one as a friend and she was so curious about white kids. And she told me at graduation that she decided to go to college upstate, to a school that would have mostly white students. And a big part of that was just because she wanted something different. She still had this curiosity and she was basically going on this one woman integration program.

Ira Glass

Which brings us to today's program. Last week, we did a program about people resisting integration at every turn. This week, we have a show of people who are running towards it, people like Kiana. And when that process goes well, the inevitable next step in an integration program, even if it's a program with just one person in it, is that people meet each other, they go through the basic "Who are you? What are you about?"

And so, Chana, how is it going? How is her voluntary school desegregation plan that she invented for herself going?

Chana Joffe-Walt

Mostly great. She's a year in. She just finished her freshman year, but it's been an adjustment. I mean, everything is different.

KIANA JACKSON: Everybody is really friendly, and I didn't expect that as much, just coming from going to school in the South Bronx and just commuting all the time, everybody is not so friendly. And here, everybody will stand there for a whole minute holding the door for you until you get there. Just friendly all the time, and sometimes you don't know if it's genuine because you're not used to it.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Wait, so you find yourself questioning if they do really want to hold the door for you?

KIANA JACKSON: I know that they do, but it's weird.

Chana Joffe-Walt

This is probably a difference of moving from New York City to a small town but to Kiana she wonders, "Maybe they do that because they're white." Kiana went from a high school that is 1% white to a college that is 75% white, so this is a thing that happens with segregation. Once you get around people who you haven't been around before, you become just super aware of their race and your race, and is that thing happening right now because of race or is that because you're white? Is that because you're from a different part of the country or a small town? Are you just weird?

Kiana told me she has two white roommates, and one of her roommates always asks her is it OK if I sleep over at my boyfriend's place tonight? Which who knows why she does that? Maybe she just thinks somebody should know where I'm sleeping. But to Kiana, it seems strange, and the first thing she goes to is, "Oh, that must be a white thing."

Ira Glass

And has she seen white wasted? Did she get her wish?

Chana Joffe-Walt

She did. It took a little while, but she did. There was this big football game that she told me about in great detail between her school, SUNY Cortland, and their arch rival, Ithaca College. And it was her first football game. Very exciting. And after the game, kids from both schools left the stadium, flooded the streets.

KIANA JACKSON: Thousands of kids. Walking through the crowd, you could smell the liquor or the beer. You could smell it. That's how bad it was. There were so many people that everybody was just walking in the streets. And the Ithaca cars-- this was crazy. So Ithaca cars driving through our turf, basically. And this one kid pulled down his pants and put his ass cheeks all over the girls' car.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Was the girl from Ithaca?

KIANA JACKSON: Yeah, she was an Ithaca girl. All the girls in the car were from Ithaca, and that's why they did that.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Oh, OK.

KIANA JACKSON: And the girls pissed off. And they were arguing and arguing. She spit at him. And they were like, "Oh, we don't care. Blah-blah-blah."

Chana Joffe-Walt

Then she says everybody started pulling down their pants and putting their butts on the car.

KIANA JACKSON: Yeah, to back him up like, "We don't care. Cortland." It was funny.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Was that what you imagined?

KIANA JACKSON: Definitely, just insane, definitely what I pictured. It lived up to the expectations. No boundaries at all, just like epic. They just act like next level crazy, like in a big mob, just do what you want. And Ithaca, they had this slogan, "Portland girls poop." And it was like--

Chana Joffe-Walt

Wait, "Portland girls poop?"

KIANA JACKSON: Yeah, that's what they-- that was their comeback--

Chana Joffe-Walt

Like, P-O-O-P?

KIANA JACKSON: Yeah, it was really bad. We were just like, "OK, I guess."

Chana Joffe-Walt

Kiana wanted to be around white kids just because it seemed fun, and interesting, and I think she'd get to test out some theories about how crazy white kids are, how much freedom they get to be crazy. But also, this gets her something, something Kiana thinks it's worth going out of her way for.

KIANA JACKSON: Some of the kids from my high school who are seniors now, they'll talk to us and be like, "Oh, what school should I go to? How do you like your school?" The advice I give to seniors is "OK, everybody's going to want to be around their same kind of people, but if you're always in the same environment, always doing the same things with the same people, you become naive or you don't really know about the world. It's better if you experience something different, because you get a view of other people. If you end up changing, if you end up becoming a different person, a lot of it is based on the community you're surrounded by, and that's reality. Your environment really makes you.

Ira Glass

Last week on our program, we did the first of two episodes on school desegregation, and we heard about a place that integrated schools by accident, really by accident. And the white schools in that story, they did not want integration. The governor and state legislator are actually right now trying to undo it-- this is in Missouri-- even though, as we said last week, integrating public schools has proven to be this incredibly effective way to improve education, to close the achievement gap between minority students and white students.

And today, we wanted to see what happens when integration is a plan that everybody is embracing, when people do not run away, or move, or resist, when they do what Kiana did and they seek it out, thinking that it will give them something valuable. We have the story today of an entire city trying, I mean actively trying, to integrate the schools. And we got the White House on line 1. I don't even know what that means, but it just seems like something you say. Stay with us.

Act 1, my secret public plan.

Act One: My Secret Public Plan

Ira Glass

I want to read to you a report from the state commissioner of education from the state of Connecticut written in 1987. This is the kind of routine annual report sort of thing they put out, but the commissioner must have woken up feeling bold and literary the morning that he wrote this particular one, because he spoke of the tale of two Connecticuts, one wealthier, majority white Connecticut with great schools, another poor, majority black and Latino Connecticut with awful schools. And then the commissioner said that the state, in the overwhelmingly white suburbs, should promote collective responsibility for integrating the public schools.

He's writing this in 1987. This is the same year, the same exact year, that Boston began to walk away from busing after a decade of riots and basically civil war there over school integration. Around the country, cities were giving up on integration. There was massive white flight. This is not a time of collective responsibility.

And then, even more remarkable, in at least one city in Connecticut, it happened. In Hartford, they went from 11% of their students in integrated schools to nearly half. Chana has the story of how that happened and what this rare, rare thing looks like today.

Chana Joffe-Walt

When that report came out, it was a political scandal. It was on the front page of the newspaper just before Christmas. A state senator called for the commissioner's resignation for writing the report. The person who got Hartford to go from screaming over that report to actually doing what it called for was a man named John Brittain.

John Brittain is a civil rights lawyer. He brings the decorum of a courtroom to all matters. John Brittain says excuse my street language to proceed an entirely dignified statement. He can elevate simple things, like phone tag.

John Brittain

Hello, Chana. This is John Brittain, calling you back as you requested. I'll try you later on today.

Chana Joffe-Walt

I believe you can hear his bowtie through the voicemail.

John Brittain

It's Tuesday, the 14th of July. Bye-bye.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Soon after the report came out, John Brittain, with other lawyers and 17 plaintiffs, sued the state. Connecticut was a good candidate for this kind of case because of its constitution and legal precedent there. But John Brittain believed even if he won in court, they still might not actually get desegregation. He'd studied countless examples of legal victories that led to busing, which led to riots and white flight.

And he knew how easily people could call the whole thing a disaster and walk away. He needed to innovate. Desegregation would only stick if people chose it. He would get the courts on his side, but he needed the public even more. By the time he won, if he won, John Brittain needed the public to want to integrate. He needed to create what the report called for-- a sense of collective responsibility.

So in addition to battling in the courts, he was preparing a second front, a battle that would happen for the newspapers and TV. The people he'd be bringing into court would have to do double duty. They'd have to give legal testimony and also talk to the people of Connecticut. Of course, those who could testify most credibly about the conditions in the schools were employed by the schools.

John Brittain

And we had to ask the superintendent if he would mind using his employees to be plaintiffs in the case, and he consented.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Happily?

John Brittain

Yes, right. What superintendent do you know would let his employees be a plaintiff in a suit that's going to-- excuse my street language-- bad mouth the district in terms of its disadvantages in open court?

Chana Joffe-Walt

Hartford teachers did badmouth the district. They described what it was like to teach a classroom of kids who came to school without coats in the winter. They complained about instructional time lost because nearly every child in the class suffered severe emotional issues, or dental issues, or hadn't eaten. They said their classrooms were overwhelmed by poverty.

One principal described how when it rained his cafeteria would flood. A classroom ceiling had collapsed a few minutes before kids came to class. And he described how another time the roof came down, pigeon carcasses came tumbling into the building. Pigeon carcasses. The lawyers made sure to dwell on that one.

The dead pigeons made the front page of the newspaper. Readers were horrified. And the people inside the schools, who already knew about this, were excited. Someone was finally talking about it. They were calling John Brittain and asking to testify. It became a bandwagon. Everyone got on.

John Brittain

We had the city government, the teachers, the parents, the religious community, everybody connected, the business community, the city council begged to be a plaintiff in this suit. The Board of Education begged to be a plaintiff in the suit.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Wait, the Board of Education begged to be a plaintiff?

John Brittain

Yes, they were totally on our side. They turned over all the records, all the information, all their data.

Chana Joffe-Walt

So you're suing the state--

John Brittain

Yes.

Chana Joffe-Walt

And the Board of Education is asking to be on your side, and not only to be on your side but to testify.

John Brittain

Correct.

Chana Joffe-Walt

There are only a few places in the country that have seriously committed to school integration over a long period of time. Louisville, Kentucky is one. Wake County in North Carolina. Those are the biggest. And in each case, something like this right here has occurred. A public reckoning seems to be a required step, some sort of long process by which the gap between two unequal systems is made very clear to the people who are not paying attention.

The people John Brittain chose to testify did not just talk about the bleak education Hartford students were getting. They talked about what they were not getting, what it meant for their students to go to school so close to kids who had great teachers, beautiful classrooms with solid ceilings, kids whose parents had cars and college degrees and ran insurance companies in town.

One teacher testified, "I think that children can overcome the stigma of poverty. I think children can overcome the stigma of their ethnicity. But what they cannot overcome is the stigma of separation. That is like a damned spot in their being and their self-image. And that's what segregation does to children. They see themselves as apart and separate because of the language they speak, because of the color of their skin, the origin of their parents."

John Brittain and his team won on an appeal to the state Supreme Court in 1995. It took another seven years, until 2003, for the state to settle with the plaintiffs, 14 years after he first filed the suit. When they did settle, the plan they came up with is a system where every family can choose integrated schools. But they don't have to. No parent would be required to send their kid across town. No forced busing, as it was called.

If desegregation was going to work, it would be completely voluntary. Parents would opt in. And not just the parents who read headlines during the decade long trial, but parents a whole generation later, now, parents who were kids themselves when the dead pigeons were in the newspaper. John Brittain's theory that with the help of the courts it was possible to design an integrated school system where parents continue to opt into integration over and over again, that's what's being tested right now in Hartford.

Child

Everyday day at school, I get to do what I love best with friends from all over Greater Hartford.

Chana Joffe-Walt

From broad, lofty vision to sales, just as John Brittain did for over a decade in court, Hartford is still every moment of every day waging an aggressive hearts and minds campaign. Only now, they aren't selling a vision. They're selling actual schools, great new schools, magnet schools that each have some special focus, like performing arts or environmental sciences. And they're selling these schools specifically to white suburban families. In large part, Hartford's integration plan hinges on getting white kids to come and integrate Hartford schools, white kids like this cheerful girl in the promotional video who has friends from all over Greater Hartford. She goes to a Hartford magnet school. Which one, you ask?

Child

I chose Classical Magnet, where I get to learn Latin, the liberal arts, and get ready for a top college. And there are other schools for working with computers and technology, performing plays, dance, and music, engineering, running your own business, sports and medical sciences, and a lot more. I chose to go to a Harvard host magnet school and so can you.

Chana Joffe-Walt

She chose this. That's on purpose. This is not forced anything. It is a multimedia blitz. There are videos, and T-shirts, and USB sticks, and bracelets, and iPhone covers. There are radio spots with HOT-937.

Radio Host

Songs on Hot 937, hot937.com.

Chana Joffe-Walt

And there's a chief marketer. The woman behind the Hartford sales assault is named Enid Rey. Enid Rey considers any time of the year a good time to be selling Hartford magnet schools, even Christmas.

Enid Rey

I'm Enid Ray. How are you? I'm doing really well.

Radio Host

That time of year again?

Enid Rey

Yes, it is that time of year. With holiday cheer comes the best gift you can give your child-- quality educational experience.

Radio Host

Education.

Enid Rey

That's right. That's the name of the game.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Enid Rey is a powerhouse. She's a lawyer by training, and when she was in law school, she studied law from one incredibly inspiring teacher named John Brittain. Enid Rey was John Brittain's student in the early '90s, and now it's on her to keep John Brittain's plan moving forward.

Enid Rey

We are always recruiting. We're always trying to get the message out about our Hartford schools.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Outside Enid's office, there's a cartoony picture of a school bus filled with multicultural kids. But I would not have been surprised to see a sign with the words "Always be closing" in that spot. Enid throws around marketing phrases like "value proposition." She's learned how to transform any question into an answer that begins with "I think what's great is." And she is so quick. She'll note, "Did you say your kid was into art? Have you heard of the Hartford Academy of the Arts? Here's a brochure and a video. I

noticed you have a younger son over there. Did I mention the magnet schools provide free pre-K? Our Montessori program is very popular. Oh, and the environmental sciences school--"

Enid Rey

Has a wonderful community room, outdoor gardens, a butterfly vivarium.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Also, do you work in the city?

Enid Rey

What a gift it is to be able to drive in with your child every day. And so one of our recruitment billboards said "Both you and your child should be working here in Hartford." That was a hook.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Enid Rey begins many days by staring at a map. Hartford students are 80% black and Hispanic. 10 miles outside the city are suburbs like Glastonbury and Avon that are 90% white. They can bus Hartford kids out of the city, and they do, but they also have to get white kids in. So a lot of mornings, Enid zeroes in on all the suburbs. Who are they reaching? Where should her recruiter go that day?

Enid Rey

So Bloomfield has a 28% participation rate versus Simsbury, which has a 3.3% participation rate. That's where she's going.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Enid and her staff show up at baseball games in the suburbs, talk to parents about Hartford magnet schools, they leave brochures in suburban libraries, they shop at Girl Scout troop meetings, Mommy and Me groups, the YMCA. They study this market meticulously. And they consult professional marketing firms, not your little mom and pop places either, Enid tells me proudly, but people who advise companies like Apple.

Enid Rey

Folks who have the technology and expertise to try to help us segment the population and hit the target, just like Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and Apple.

Chana Joffe-Walt

And just like they do in the marketing departments of large corporations, Hartford invented a scientific sounding term for the target population. They call them "reduced isolation students." That means white kids. And more recently, they included Asian kids in this mix too. They need 25%. A school that is 25% reduced isolation kids officially counts as an integrated school. That is the target of all of this effort, all the maps, the marketing firms, the promotional videos, all sales directed at one precise target.

Ryan Welcome

What is that?

Sarah Welcome

Let me put out some food for you.

[LAUGHTER]

Chana Joffe-Walt

I talked to lots of white suburban families around Hartford to find out what it's like to be on the receiving end of Enid's marketing blitz. Sarah and Ryan Welcome got my call, invited me over to their home, prepared a spread of food for me, including olives with toothpicks that their nine-year-old delivered to my hand, because that's just how they do. Man!

Sarah Welcome

Get comfortable.

Ryan Welcome

Don't worry. You're going to get pampered here, OK?

Chana Joffe-Walt

That is amazing. The Welcomes live in a suburb across the river from Hartford-- three kids, dogs, reptiles, lots of snacks. They grew up going to their neighborhood school and figured their kids would do the same. When their oldest was about to turn five, Sarah Welcome went to an open house at the school down the road.

Sarah Welcome

And I left feeling a little-- I wasn't really impressed with it. The teachers, I thought, were fine. The school seemed OK. I guess it was the parents. It was the parents. They all seemed hostile. Like, "What was the school going to do for my kid" sort of attitude. It made me cringe.

Ryan Welcome

I just remember the general feeling of being underwhelmed, you know?

Chana Joffe-Walt

This is Ryan, Sarah's husband. Just to pause right here for a second to say, this is a moment Enid is obsessed with. There's always a short window where a family's thinking about school and open to new ideas. Enid studies this moment, tries to prepare the ground, and then all she can do is hope that please, please, please, one of her videos or flyers will make it to the target.

Sarah, just at that moment, had gone back to college, Trinity College, when her son was about to start kindergarten. And very soon after the open house, she ran into a fellow mom, Audrey, at Trinity.

Sarah Welcome

I think I was working in the computer lab, writing a paper. And she had a flyer, and I remember this a little bit more vividly. She said, "You should apply to this magnet school. There's a new magnet school in Hartford that's taking suburban kids from all over. It sounds like a really great program. It's full day. It's

free." And I had never heard of a magnet school before. Ryan and I didn't grow up with magnet schools. So this was a whole new concept.

Chana Joffe-Walt

And just like that, Sarah migrated from one dataset in Enid's office to another-- parents who don't know about magnet schools to parents who do. Enid knows the next step for this group. The Welcomes were curious about this magnet thing. They read about one online, but then they looked up the address.

Ryan Welcome

I mean, it was in the north end of Hartford. And the north end of Hartford is not well known for amazing schools around here or anything like that. It's the scary part of Hartford. We knew the school had to wow us, because it's in the frickin' north end Hartford. You know what I mean?

Sarah Welcome

Ryan is absolutely right. It's not necessarily the place where two young parents who grew up in Ellington would find themselves going. I never went to the north end of Hartford. I had absolutely no reason to go there.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Enid knows she has to get parents to go there, because her target families know places like Hartford aren't white, but that's often all they know. They have never searched for housing there. They don't shop there. They don't go to church there. What they know is people like them used to live there and then they left. So the last step to get to closing, Enid has to physically get them into the neighborhoods where the schools are so they can see.

Enid Rey

The residential neighborhoods, they look like neighborhoods in Anytown, USA, suburbia. They just happen to be in the urban core, and there happened to be a lot more black and brown people around. And some parents, they'll say, "Are they going to be the only white kid in the class?"

Chana Joffe-Walt

This question is the most common one Enid gets, and the most difficult. White people do not have a lot of practice being the only one. The black family moves into the white neighborhood. The black kids much more often are bussed into the white school. Enid Ray is trying to flip a long American tradition of one way integration. The Welcome family made it to the magnet school in the scary part of Hartford, which did not seem so scary to them. They visited Breakthrough Magnet and loved it. They ended up sending all three of their children there. They were not looking for integration but they were happy to find it.

Sarah Welcome

I thought that was kind of great. It's just not how I grew up. Honestly, there were maybe, what? Two black kids in a high school?

Ryan Welcome

Yeah, I would say.

Chana Joffe-Walt

This is how integration works in Hartford. Sometimes, white families are happy to see it, but it's not usually why they show up. Their neighborhood school is often pretty good but they were looking because their kid was bullied, or there was too much standardized testing, or the other parents seemed annoying. Enid, who is selling them on magnet schools, which exist to promote integration, also does not mention integration. The long history of segregated schooling doesn't come up. The current reality of segregated housing is irrelevant. No one here is being moved by a sense of collective responsibility. It is as if John Brittain never happened.

Instead, the experience Enid is curating is for comfort. All the detail she considers, like making sure there are white kids in the brochures, or if parents do tour a school, Enid does her best to have their child shadow a white student. That way they can see they won't be the only one.

Enid Ray

If it was just we're marketing and all there are, are black and brown families, that person's not going to see themselves reflected.

Chana Joffe-Walt

But that's so ironic that you're marketing a desegregation program by showing people of the same race that other people of the same race will be there too.

Enid Rey

Right, because they need to know that it is about all of us. So we encourage families to come and visit us and be surprised.

Keegan Miller

This is our vivarium, where we grow plants and stuff.

Chana Joffe-Walt

The butterfly vivarium is in the Environmental Sciences Magnet School at Mary Hooker. Keegan Miller's a sixth grader there, a white suburban kid with a demanding hairdo. Keegan was supposed to show an interested suburban student around his school but first I got a personal tour.

Keegan Miller

So this is the aquatics lab.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Wow.

Keegan Miller

Currently, the sixth grade is raising baby trout. And that LEGO item right there, I built that. It's an automatic feeder.

Chana Joffe-Walt

It feeds the trout?

Keegan Miller

Yes, every five hours.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Keegan tells me he built the feeder in the LEGO lab upstairs. That's Keegan's favorite class, LEGO lab. He also made a 3D insect viewer, but that's in the greenhouse. Along our tour, happy looking kid see me with my microphone and stop me to tell me that it's true. They are happy.

Vaishu

I'm Vaishu. And I've been in this school for five years. I love it.

Child

I really, really like this school.

ALLIE: I'm Allie and I really, really like this school because--

Chana Joffe-Walt

The hundreds of millions of dollars it took to transform this school and other magnet schools in Hartford came from John Brittain's lawsuit. . That money built the atrium, with the pond in the middle of it, the angled glass that's all over the place, the aquatics lab.

Keegan Miller

I think there's a class in the planetarium. I think they may be watching.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Where's the planetarium?

Keegan Miller

This is the planetarium. Oh, there's nobody in there.

Chana Joffe-Walt

This is a planetarium?

Keegan Miller

Yeah, the lights don't want to work with me.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Oh my god.

He turns on the stars.

Keegan Miller

You could look at space from here. It's really cool. All the stars. It's like a 360 view.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Whoa and you can just come and look at what space looks like any time you want?

Keegan Miller

Not anytime you want.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Because that would be ridiculous. When you drive around suburban Hartford now, occasionally you'll see a sign on someone's lawn that says "I heart magnets." Neighbors will ask, "Hey, where does your kid go on the bus every morning?" The few-minute conversation that follows is the most powerful marketing tool available. It's what Enid or any marketer dreams of-- a conversation where one parent goes to another, "Oh, I think I've heard of that place. Does she like it? Is it safe?" Neighbor to neighbor, white person to white person. It is the same potent tool that three decades ago helped create segregated neighborhoods, repurposed to do the exact opposite.

Of lot of the parents I talked to didn't know about the lawsuit or even that they were part of an integration plan. But they were like Ryan and Sarah Welcome. They considered the fact that their kid was in a diverse school a bonus. It wasn't on the top of the list but it was something they liked. "Well-rounded" was a phrase I heard a lot. One dad told me, "You won't believe how often my kid comes home and looks something up he heard from a friend. He's so excited by how different everyone is." And another mom told me, "I think it just gives them a deeper understanding of the world around them, which is what you hope happens in school."

Often, in these conversations, parents also mentioned, like Sarah did, how different this was from their own experience in school as kids. Sarah and Ryan grew up in a small, white, farming community in Connecticut, not far from Hartford. She says when she was a teenager, her high school visited a school near the city for a day, and she remembers it seemed like another world.

Sarah Welcome

To us, it felt like a massive, huge high school with lots of black kids and possibly Puerto Rican kids. I remember it being scary. I remember some of us feeling scared. And that's weird. And now that I think about it, that sounds so stupid-- you know-- and racist, and awful, and embarrassing. I feel ashamed that I ever felt that way.

Chana Joffe-Walt

But she says her kids probably won't share her ignorance. They have black friends and Puerto Rican friends and Hindu friends. They're learning how to interact, and play, and fight, and resolve fights with lots of different kinds of people. Again, bonus.

Sarah Welcome

It came to me in a very happenstance way. If I had never gone to Trinity College and didn't meet Audrey, it may have never happened.

Chana Joffe-Walt

The list of things that went into Sarah arriving at that moment with Audrey is so much longer than she knows, which is part of the plan. Sarah is not supposed to be able to see the enormous machinery working to make that moment possible, the years of planning, of litigation, the bussing contracts and inter-district agreements, and the maps on Enid's wall, all that is kept backstage so that what's onstage looks easy, so that Sarah can experience that exact feeling of happening into a cool thing.

This strategy is working. This is how Hartford went from having 11% of Hartford kids in integrated schools in 2007 to almost half now. Unlike Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Hartford has given white families a way to choose integration. And many of them are choosing it. And those families, those are the people Enid needs.

Enid Rey

Right, people who we need. And we desperately need some of those families.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Hartford desperately needs those families because despite all the success the city has had, they are facing a potential crisis. The last couple years, Hartford has barely been making its quota of reduced isolation students for its magnet schools, the required number of white kids, and now also Asian kids to call a school integrated. And if they stop meeting the quota, they don't get money. If they don't get money, they can't create new schools to reach more kids. In fact, the magnet schools that already exist will lose the money that makes them such great schools. The stars will stop shining in the planetarium.

Enid and her team have theories about why they've stalled, including one theory Enid does not like to think about, and that is that they've maxed out. They may have already reached all the white families who were dissatisfied with their neighborhood schools, which, on the whole, are pretty good schools.

They may have already gotten all the white families who'd be willing to drive to the scary part of Hartford for an open house, and then who'd be willing to do what so few white families have done before them, to be the ones to bring the integration. Maybe everyone who was going to tell their neighbor about their great magnet school in the city already has. Market saturation. If that is what's making it so hard to meet the quota recently, that could blow up the plan.

Enid's office is on the third floor of a state building. And on that side of the hall, where she is, it's all about wooing suburban families and offering treats and butterflies. Across the hall is a place called The Regional School Choice Office.

Enid Rey

Hey, ladies.

Chana Joffe-Walt

The Regional School Choice Office is a tiny cluster of cubicles crowded with women on headsets answering the phones. All available space is covered in forms, and brochures, and paperwork. Anybody can call or visit the office, but mostly this side of the hall is not for the suburban parents. It's for the city parents, the Hartford families. There's a lottery for a Hartford magnet school seat, and last fall, more than 4,000 Hartford students did not win that lottery. These were families who, for the most part, don't get courted. They get paperwork. And the majority of them get wait-listed.

Woman

Now they're calling a lot for their wait-list numbers. So now they are at the point of really wanting the seat. When they don't realize we get a lot more applications than we do seats, parents call every day to see if their numbers have moved, and if they're still going to have that chance.

Chana Joffe-Walt

So you're dealing with a lot of frustrated parents sometimes.

Woman

Sometimes? All the time, all the time.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Hartford parents right now are frustrated for the exact same reason parents were frustrated with Hartford schools in the 1980s when John Brittain sued-- their schools are inferior. Magnet school kids do great. They go to integrated schools and 80% of them pass state tests. Hartford public school kids go to segregated schools. Less than 40% of them pass state tests.

Magnet school kids can explore space on the first floor of their school. Hartford public school buildings have gotten better but they're not like that. For the 50% of Hartford families who can't get their kids into the beautiful, integrated magnet schools, things are exactly the same as they've always been, only worse because now there's a school with a planetarium down the block that they can't get into.

That school with the planetarium, by the way, the Environmental Sciences Magnet, it used to just be Mary Hooker Elementary before integration. It was just a regular public school. And back when it was a regular public school, it was almost entirely Latino. There was no planetarium, no LEGO lab, or butterfly vivarium. Those came when it went magnet. Those came with the white students.

The argument against separate but equal was never that separate schools couldn't be equal, theoretically, just that it never, ever happens. One of the early civil rights leaders, Charles Thompson, wrote, "The separate school or separate anything with equal facilities is a fiction."

Hartford believed that when it set up its program, that the only way to make the schools better for nonwhite kids was to bring in white kids. And now here they are, stuck in a very uncomfortable place. They don't have equal schools for everybody yet. Instead, what they have are excellent schools that half the city's population, almost all of them black and Hispanic, cannot access.

They have spent decades working so hard to replace a separate but equal system, and they're still having to live with one. Which brings us back to Enid Rey. Her job is to get the city unstuck. Every day, she is consumed with wooing, courting, encouraging white families. And at night, Enid goes home to her neighborhood in Hartford. She's Puerto Rican. She grew up in Hartford. She still lives here.

So this is a bizarre job for her, assuring white suburban families, "Don't worry. It's safe. There'll be other white kids here." I'm just curious what it's like for you to be in the position of being the conduit for all of those conversations?

Enid Rey

It sucks! It's very hard and it's very emotional. I mean, it's really tough.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Enid grabbed my microphone as she said this, which totally surprised me, because she had spent hours trying to sell me on Hartford's great schools. But she wanted to make sure I understood just how brutal this job can be. At home, Enid's neighbors nag her. "How come my son can't get into that magnet school? Can't you help my first grader out of his failing school?" She says her husband sets a timer when she's grocery shopping. He sets a timer and watches it. And he will save her if she is trapped in a conversation with an upset parent, a parent who Enid can almost always sympathize with, because she knows they're trapped with bad options, in exactly the same way Enid's family was when she was growing up. Meanwhile--

Enid Rey

Some of our suburban families come because they get free preschool. I mean, think about it. They could afford to pay, but if you get a magnet seat, you're going to get free preschool. And I think a factor is that in the back of their head is also, "If it doesn't work, I'll just go back to my neighborhood school." Right? "If this whole thing just doesn't work out for my child or I don't feel comfortable, I always have another option." Right?

Chana Joffe-Walt

It's an experiment.

Enid Rey

Right. And they can experiment, quite frankly. Not so much the case for our Hartford resident families. This is it. This is their shot at quality.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Of course, they'd get another shot if more Hartford kids could be bussed to the suburbs. But here's the problem with that. Integration is not just voluntary for white families who choose to come into the city, to the magnet schools. The suburban school districts also get to choose. They get to choose how many city children they'll allow to be bused in to their schools. And they don't allow in so many.

The last superintendent of Hartford public schools wanted to drop the whole integration thing altogether, just focus on Hartford students. Enid says she can totally understand that position. John Brittain, the man who put this whole thing in motion, concedes that 50% of Hartford kids still in inferior schools, that's bad. But he says they are not stalled. They're just in the middle.

John Brittain believes they're on a path that will get to 100% of Hartford kids in integrated magnet schools. Here's how he imagines they'll get there. By the time this current generation of kids is grown, white people will no longer be the majority in this country. And then white parents will want their kids in integrated schools, because that will give them the skills to thrive and compete in a more diverse society.

John Brittain

Whites will perceive in their self-interests that it's important for their children to grow up in an integrated setting.

Chana Joffe-Walt

In other words, the pitch will shift from one that completely ignores the diversity of the schools and is instead focused on how much your kid will get to one that sells the diversity of the schools and is still focused on how much your kid will get. I pointed out that there are plenty of examples of places where a white minority has not chosen to embrace diversity, but John Brittain stuck to his guns.

John Brittain

I do think it's going to happen. It probably won't happen in my lifetime at age 70, but I think we're on the road to that trajectory.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Ryan Welcome, the suburban dad who sent all three of his kids to the magnet school in the city, told me when they visited that school he felt like he won the lottery. Ryan didn't mean anything by this, just that the school was lovely. But of course, that is quite literally true. His family won the lottery. John Britain's plan to scale up his vision of a completely integrated Hartford preserves that feeling, that you lucked out. Because that is what works, and it's also what's true.

Ira Glass

Chana Joffe-Walt. There's a great book that tells the story of Hartford's integration plan by Susan Eden called *The Children in Room E4*. Coming up, the Obama administration admires what's being done in Hartford. They say they are for more integration. They don't seem to be pushing it. We ask why from the man at the top. Well, not the very top-- the Secretary of Education, that's the one we talked to. That's in a minute, from Chicago Public Radio, when our program continues.

It's This American Life. I'm Ira Glass. Today on our program, *The Problem We All Live With Part Two*. This is our second show about school integration. As we said last week, it's amazingly effective at bringing up test scores and closing the achievement gap, but it's never really talked about as a serious option for fixing schools. So we thought, "OK, let's talk about it here." We have arrived at Act 2 of our program. Act 2, What's it All About, Arne?

Act Two: What's It All About, Arne?

Ira Glass

There was this moment a few years ago that was small but telling when a woman named Pat Todd gave a speech at a conference in DC. She's from one of the other very few places that runs a regional school integration program, Louisville, Kentucky, Jefferson County. They've been doing this since the 1970s. They've never abandon this, even though, she says in her speech, it doesn't get easier. It never does. It's been decades of resistance, court cases, indifference, right up to today. And she said in her speech there was one thing that would make this a whole lot easier for her. She brought it up very politely.

Pat Todd

I bring from Jefferson County, Kentucky an invitation.

Ira Glass

Her invitation was basically saying, "Hey, bigwigs, Obama administration, Washington, we need you. We need you out front on this. We need the big guns. Speak up. We cannot hear you down here.

Pat Todd

What I really need and what my community really needs right now is for someone besides the local educators to be talking about the importance of diversity in public education, people with stature and credibility well beyond the local level.

Ira Glass

This week, Chana Joffe-Walt and Nikole Hannah Jones, who reported last week's episode, talked to the Secretary of Education Arne Duncan about the fact that the administration does not seem to be pushing this as a policy. Hi, guys.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Hello.

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: Hi.

Ira Glass

So what did he say?

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: What Secretary Duncan said is, "Of course the administration supports integration. Integration is a good thing."

Arne Duncan

So it's something that's obviously been very important to many of us for many, many years, long before we ever came to Washington. We have not done enough.

Chana Joffe-Walt

So he supports integration. He said lots of people in the administration also support integration and confirmed something we heard from other sources that this was really on the table, especially during the transition into the Obama administration, that lots of people were talking about integration and trying to figure out how to make it into formal policy.

Ira Glass

Mhm.

And then very quickly they got an opportunity, because they came out with the Race to the Top.

Yeah, just remind us what that was.

Chana Joffe-Walt

So Race to the Top was the Obama administration's first big education initiative, where they really set their agenda. It was money from the Stimulus during the recession. And it was basically \$4 billion set aside to encourage states to move in the direction that the Obama administration wanted them to. So if they increased teacher accountability, did stuff with turnaround schools, expanded Common Core, basically all these things that I'm saying. If you've heard any of these terms, it's because of Race to the Top.

Ira Glass

Right.

Chana Joffe-Walt

30 states changed their laws. And Race to the Top would have been a pretty perfect place to put integration because they didn't make anybody do anything--

Ira Glass

They didn't force it. It wasn't forced integration.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Right, it wasn't forced integration. It was incentives. So it was, "If you want to apply, you can, and you can move in this direction that we want you to."

Ira Glass

OK, so you have a pro-integration administration. They're trying to incentivize states to do all sorts of things. Did they include it?

Chana Joffe-Walt

No. It was not in there. And actually, John Brittain, who had been meeting with the administration during the transition, expected it to. And he went to read about the Race to the Top program in the Federal Register, which outlines what the Race to the Top was going to do, and he read every page.

John Brittain

We didn't see any mention of school diversity.

Chana Joffe-Walt

So you're flipping through what? 100 pages, hundreds of pages?

John Brittain

That's right, and all of these various grants, and you read the fine lines in these various grants, and we didn't find it. I felt-- I felt I was punched in the gut, and I lost my breath.

Chana Joffe-Walt

You were sitting, reading the Federal Register?

John Brittain

Yes.

Chana Joffe-Walt

And you really had thought there would be.

John Brittain

That is correct. And I particularly thought that there would be because, again, in the big conference room, at DoD, Maryland Avenue, as it's called here in Washington DC, with the top deputies and the chief himself, Duncan, hearing that the Obama administration was committed to research-based policies. And here we are, pointing to all of the scholarly articles and journals showing the positive benefits of school integration, and yet the administration initially ignored them.

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: So we asked Secretary Duncan why. That's actually a question I've been wanting to ask him for a couple of years now. And he said that they didn't include it because it's too toxic.

Arne Duncan

I think it would have been very difficult to get that through Congress at that point. Congress had to approve this, and there are other tools to try and get at this.

Chana Joffe-Walt

It just seemed like such a perfect place to put it in. You could have just snuck it in. You wouldn't even have had to call it integration. It could have been money for magnet schools.

Arne Duncan

You can't sneak things in. That's not how Congress works. And you have to be very clear on this. And the chances of Congress approving something like that, sadly, we thought we were like basically none.

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: OK, but are you saying that it would have been impossible to get Congress to approve something that just simply gave districts an incentive to increase diversity, that was not forcing anything? Is that what you're saying?

Arne Duncan

Well, we thought it would have been very, very difficult with Congress. And again, we thought there are other strategies, other vehicles to get at this.

Chana Joffe-Walt

So when he's talking about other strategies, he means they are promoting integration through other means, through visiting places that are promoting integration, through helping districts figure out how to understand court rulings on integration if they want to do integration to encourage that. But he also said, "Those students, who you're worried about in segregated schools, we're doing a ton of stuff to help those students in particular. We've put 5 billion extra dollars into schools that are the lowest performing schools. Those tend to be high poverty segregated schools. We're trying to focus on improving teachers in those schools, improving quality in those schools."

Arne Duncan

We do have some high poverty schools now where you have 90% graduation rates, 95% graduation rates, and 90% of those are going on to college. Now, we do not have enough. We have a long way to go. There are many places where there are huge inequities in resources, and federal money can't begin to make up for the fact that so much of public schools is locally funded by property taxes, which is inherently in many places unfair and unequal, and I would say un-American.

But you've seen massive influxes of literally a couple million dollars per school in many of these places that have led to more teachers, and more social workers, and more after-school programming, and lower class size, and that's why you're getting better results.

Ira Glass

Nikole, you've reported on this for years. What do you think of that?

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: What I think when Secretary Duncan is saying that the administration is going to focus on bringing those segregated schools up to par, then what that's saying is the administration is going to try to make separate schools equal. And separate but equal is the doctrine of the Supreme Court in the 1800s that Brown v Board of Education struck down.

Ira Glass

When you asked the Secretary if he saw it as separate but equal, did he agree?

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: He didn't see it that way at all. But if you just listen to the words which are saying, "We are not focusing on breaking up that segregation, we are focusing on bringing those schools up to par," I don't know what other interpretation we can have of that. And these same conversations that we're having today, we've had 10 years ago, 20 years ago, which is that we will make segregated schools equal to white schools. And we have not done it.

So I don't I don't know how, after all of these years, after all of these different reforms, and we have yet to be able to do it, how we continue to say that we will be able to. The evidence is not there.

Chana Joffe-Walt

I think there's another reason why they focus on this strategy in particular. And I think it's partially just that this approach feels better.

Ira Glass

You mean, fixing segregated schools versus integrating schools?

Chana Joffe-Walt

Versus integrating schools, because integrating schools, the very conceit of integrating schools is that you have to pay attention to race, and you have to acknowledge that you have a problem with racism.

And it's more comfortable to say that it's not an issue about racism. It's just an issue about high poverty schools that need help, and need more money, and need more resources.

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: It's just resources, not race.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Yeah, we like the idea that this is not a race issue.

Ira Glass

Yeah, or white people like the idea that it's not a race issue.

Chana Joffe-Walt

Right. By "we," I'm mean I'm talking for my people.

Ira Glass

Yeah, and mine.

[SNICKERING]

NIKOLE HANNAH JONES: That's the end right there. That was the end.

Ira Glass

Our program was produced today by Nancy Updike and Chana Joffe-Walt, with Zoe Chace, Sean Cole, Stephanie Foo, Miki Meek, Jonathan Menjivar, Brian Reed, Robyn Semien, Melissa Shipp. Julie Snyder is our editorial consultant. Other editing help this week from Neil Drumming. Production help from Billy Sullivan. Seth Lind's our operations director. Emily Condon's our production manager. Elise Bergerson's our office manager. Elna Baker scouts stories for the show. Kimberly Henderson is her office coordinator.

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Chana Joffe-Walt

Neighbor to neighbor, white person to white person.

Ira Glass

I'm Ira Glass. Back next week, with more stories of This American Life.