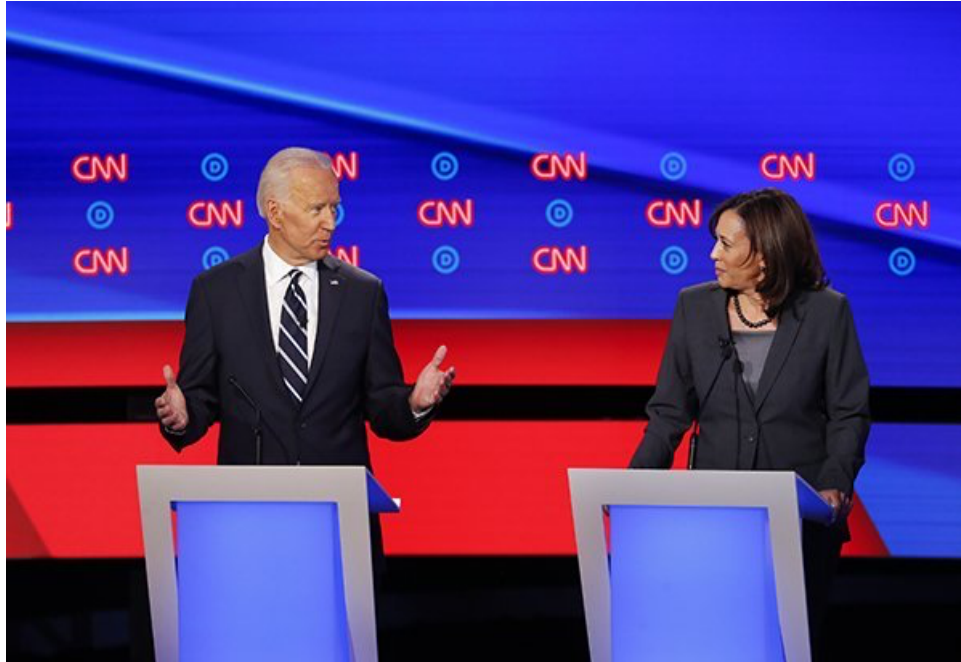


## Kamala Harris Has a Chance to Make School Desegregation a Key Issue



In July 2019, former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Kamala Harris participated in a Democratic presidential primary debate in Detroit. —AP Photo/Paul Sancya

### How the vice presidential candidate's lived experience with busing can inform policy

By **Jonathan E. Collins**, Opinion Contributor

August 13, 2020

On Tuesday, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden announced his selection of Sen. Kamala Harris as his vice-presidential running mate. Politically, Harris was an obvious choice. As a presidential candidate in the Democratic primary, Harris was a serious contender. Weeks before ending her campaign, Harris was second among Democratic Party hopefuls in **political endorsements** and sixth in total **fundraising efforts**. As recently as last July, both Quinnipiac and Change Research had her **polling at 20 percent nationally among the primary candidates**. Couple her strong performance

with Biden's pledge to select a woman for the number-two position, and the Harris selection seemed inevitable.

The critical question surrounding Harris as the vice presidential pick, though, was her memorable clash with Biden during the primary debates. If you remember anything from the Kamala Harris campaign, you remember that moment, now more than a year ago, when she went after then-frontrunner Biden for not supporting **desegregation busing**. Harris turned to the cameras—and to America—and revealed that, "There was a little girl in California, who was a part of the second class to integrate her public schools, and she was bused to school every day. And that little girl was me." After sharing her personal story, she challenged Biden directly: "Do you agree today that you were wrong to oppose busing then?"

That moment put Harris in the spotlight. Within days, she went from polling in the low single digits to **that high of 20 percent**. But the significance of that school desegregation moment wasn't just about her delivery on the debate stage or the subsequent rise (and then fall) of her poll numbers, it is in the fact that school desegregation policies are actually very popular nationally.

**"During the campaign trail, questions about school desegregation will resurface because of the public divide it created between her and Biden last year."**

Not long after Sen. Harris had her shining debate performance last year, **Gallup** fielded a survey that included questions on attitudes toward school desegregation policies. It turns out that a majority of Americans (57 percent) feel that "racial segregation in U.S. public schools" is a very or at least moderately serious issue. A majority (53 percent) also agree that "the federal government should take additional steps to reduce racial segregation in U.S. schools." Gallup also finds significant support for more specific policies that promote school desegregation, such as the creation of specialized regional magnet schools (79 percent), initiatives that promote more low-income housing (66 percent), and the redrawing of district boundaries (60 percent).

Ironically, busing was the only desegregation policy in the survey that did not receive majority support around the time that Sen. Harris was sharing her own busing experience on the national stage. It did, however, receive higher popularity among the "Obama coalition"—the young and nonwhite Democratic voters that Harris sought to mobilize in her

campaign. Fifty-nine percent of Democrats expressed support for busing, as well as 62 percent of Americans of color and 52 percent of Americans age 34 and under, Gallup found.

A few days after her sharp debate stage exchange with Biden over busing, Harris appeared in Iowa with a renewed energy. And when asked about her stance on busing, she gave an answer that reconciled well with what the public expressed in the Gallup poll saying that: "Busing is a tool among many that should be considered when we address the current issue—which is also a past issue—of desegregation in American schools."

The problem is that, after this short window, Harris never championed school desegregation as a primary issue. In the weeks that followed, she released her plans for health care expansion, the extended school day, Black homeownership in redlined communities, and criminal justice reform. What might have happened had she kept school desegregation at the center of her campaign?

Her selection as candidate for vice president casts a renewed opportunity. During the campaign trail, questions about school desegregation will resurface because of the public divide it created between hers and Biden last year. Harris will likely feel compelled to minimize the issue in order to focus on the areas where she and Biden are seen as more ideologically aligned.

But there is another option that could have major implications for education policy.

Harris could decide to champion school desegregation as a vice presidential candidate. Should the Biden-Harris combo earn a victory in November, she could take the lead on a massive reform effort to make quality education accessible for all kids no matter where they live or the obstacles they face. She could show that what happened that June night last year was not the creation of a divide. Instead, she could turn it into the start of a larger process of educating our potential next president about the impact of desegregation on the prospects for little Black boys and girls across the country.

At Brown University, I teach a class called "Policy Implementation in Education." In that course, I challenge students interested in becoming policymakers to focus on the lived experience of those directly affected by the policy. Truly transformative ideas can only be cultivated into high-impact reforms when we see names and faces.

As vice president of the United States, Kamala Harris could have the opportunity to do something special—to take the names and faces of the people from her childhood who never got the chance to attend a school equipped to meet their needs. She could use that as a North Star to build an educational system that is more equitable and more accountable to the kids who need it most.



Jonathan E. Collins is an assistant professor of education at Brown University.