Oral History Interview of John Nucci

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Interviewed by: Elias Tsismenakis, Suffolk University student from History 364: Oral History

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Interview Summary

In this interview, former Boston School Committee president and Boston city councilor John Nucci reflects on the 1974 Garrity decision, which required some students to be bused between Boston neighborhoods with the intention of creating racial balance in the public schools. He discusses the background of the decision and its impact on the city; why he decided to run for the Boston School Committee; the 1985 court decision to disengage the schools from the federal court and give control back to the school committee; and how race relations have improved in Boston. He concludes by discussing the current state of education in the Boston Public Schools.

Subject Headings

Boston (Mass.) School Committee
Busing for school integration
Morgan v. Hennigan (379 F. Supp. 410)
Nucci, John

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This interview took place on February 16, 2006, at 73 Tremont Street, Boston, MA.

**Interview transcript**

**ELIAS TSISMENAKIS:** It is Thursday, February sixteenth. I’m here at the 73 Tremont [Street] building with Mr. John Nucci conducting an interview.

(break in audio)

Ok, so could you please state your full name?

**JOHN NUCCI:** John Nucci.

**TSISMENAKIS:** And where do you live now?

**NUCCI:** I currently live in East Boston.

**TSISMENAKIS:** East Boston.

**NUCCI:** Where I was born and raised.

**TSISMENAKIS:** Born and raised.

**NUCCI:** So I’ve been there for my entire fifty-three years.

**TSISMENAKIS:** Where did you live at the time of the Garrity decision?

**NUCCI:** In East Boston. I was an East Boston resident at the time of the Garrity decision, which I guess the initial year of the Garrity decision was the early seventies.¹

¹ The Garrity decision refers to the June 21, 1974, opinion filed by Judge W. Arthur Garrity in the case of Tallulah Morgan et al. v. James Hennigan et al. (379 F. Supp. 410). Judge Garrity ruled that the Boston School Committee
TSISMEMENAKIS: Were any family members or children of friends affected by it?

NUCCI: I didn’t have any family members—I’m an only child, so I didn’t have any siblings attending the Boston Public Schools. I attended the Boston Latin [School]² (break in audio—words inaudible). I didn’t have any family members affected, but I did have siblings of friends who were affected, younger brothers and sisters.

(break in audio)

TSISMEMENAKIS: So had you gone to any other places in Boston—had you witnessed any violence that stemmed from the issue?

NUCCI: Well, as I said, my own neighborhood was exempt from the desegregation. And the fact that it was exempt was actually somewhat significant. It was exempt because the neighborhood was isolated from the rest of the city; there’s a harbor separating East Boston from the rest of the city. And the only access in those days to and from the city, from East Boston, was a tunnel. And because of the violence and concern for security that was going on around the city, the federal court decided that it could be too dangerous. It could be too easy to close up the tunnels to cause chaos or some sort of mischief in the tunnel. So the entire neighborhood from East Boston was exempt, and those who lived in East Boston basically got to attend their neighborhood schools through the entire period.

In terms of witnessing violence in other parts of the city, you couldn’t miss it. It was all that was being covered by the media at the time. It was the lead story on every news broadcast, and the sad part is that not only was it the lead story on the local news, but if you waited for the national news, it was quite often the lead story in the national news as well. And that unfortunately had “intentionally brought about and maintained racial segregation” in the Boston Public Schools. When the school committee did not submit a workable desegregation plan as the opinion had required, the court established a plan that called for some students to be bused from their own neighborhoods to attend schools in other neighborhoods, with the goal of creating racial balance in the Boston Public Schools. (See http://www.lib.umb.edu/archives/garrity2.html for more information)

² Boston Latin School is a public exam school and the oldest public school in the United States.
contributed a great deal to a very negative perception of Boston, across the country. A perception that to this day, I think has some vestiges remaining.

TSISMENAKIS: Do you remember how exactly you found out about it? Was it through the media—

NUCCI: Yeah, you know, the actual initial point of information is probably a bit hazy in my mind. It probably was the media sort of giving advance notice that it was coming, the days leading up to the final order. It’s not as though it dropped on the city overnight; this decision by the federal district court was not a surprise decision. It wasn’t a pop quiz, so to speak, a surprise test that was being administered by the federal district court. There was a lot of struggle and strife between the political leadership of the City of Boston and the federal district court in the days and months leading up to the final decision. The federal district court was basically suggesting that Boston had a segregated school system, and therefore, instructing and requesting on as strong a term as possible, that the Boston School Committee do something about that. The Boston School Committee basically refused to do anything about that, so the federal court said, “If you won’t do it, we’ll do it for you.” So all of that period leading up the actual decision, there was a lot of tension and media coverage, but at that point it was at the level of political leadership, not in the streets of the communities that were affected.

TSISMENAKIS: What was your perception of the school system at the time?

NUCCI: I think it’s safe to say that Boston had a segregated school system. I think that’s pretty undeniable. The debate rages over whether it was worthy of the upheaval that ensued in an attempt to remedy it. But the fact that it existed is somewhat undeniable. The fact that it was a segregated school system was not necessarily the result of bad intentions. It was not the result, necessarily, of policies that were deliberate and discriminatory, but the federal district court saw otherwise. My perception of the school system was that like many urban school systems, it lacked in many areas—a phenomenon not unique to Boston. I was not aware, quite frankly, that it was a segregated school system until it was pointed out by the lawsuit that it had become a
segregated school system. I don’t think that it was something that was in the consciousness of Boston residents, myself included.

What became quickly apparent, however, is that there were schools that were entirely filled with white children, and schools that were entirely filled with black children, that tended to follow the racial profile of the neighborhoods. The problem, however, was that it was being alleged—was that the schools filled with black children were getting inferior resources, inferior teachers, and the buildings were in deteriorating condition. That’s the inequity that became apparent and had to be addressed. I think that over the years, there’s been a lot of misunderstanding about what many people think the desegregation crisis was all about. I never saw it as the federal courts saying a black child sitting next to a white child will necessarily get a better education. If they were saying that, they would be wrong in my opinion. That’s a silly concept. It makes no difference what color the skin is of the child sitting next to you.

Rather, what I thought the federal court was saying is that you’ve got inferior schools filled with black children, better schools getting better resources, filled with white children, and the only way we can rectify this is to make sure there are black and white children in both those schools. And I think over the years that’s been lost. So the fact that school system was segregated I think is undeniable. I question whether the remedy that the federal district court proposed was worth it for the damage it caused.

**TSISI-MENAKIS**: When the Garrity decision was in place, what was the role of the Boston School Committee, since the federal courts had taken over?

**NUCCI**: I think the role of the Boston School Committee is essentially the same as it remains today. It was the policy-making body of the school system. It hired and fired the superintendent, who was responsible for implementing the policy of the Boston Public Schools. The school committee in those days was a five-member board, elected entirely at-large, which means they were elected city-wide. They had very high name recognition. As was the case with the Boston City Council in the sixties, for the most part it was an entirely all-white and majority male body. Its role was to basically set policy in every area for the Boston Public Schools.
TSISMEMAKIS: How did you become interested in running for the Boston School Committee?

NUCCI: In 1983, while the busing crisis was over, in terms of turmoil and strife, the city went to a district form of representation—both the school committee and the city council. So rather than being a five-member at-large body, the school committee became a thirteen-member body, elected by districts—by neighborhoods of the city. Nine of the members were elected by neighborhood and four were elected at-large. That made it easier for people to get involved. That increased the accessibility of the Boston School Committee. People without the ability to raise large sums of money or without high name recognition or great political skills could run for school committee, because you are only running in your neighborhood. So I saw it as an opportunity to get involved, to sort of put my toe into politics, without entirely jumping into the water, and to work in a field that I felt was important, which was education.

I had been working at that time at Action for Boston Community Development, ABCD, which dealt a lot with Head Start and education programs, which I thought were important. My wife was also a teacher in the Boston Public Schools. So I had a keen interest in public education; that’s why I ran as a district member: A, I was interested and B, because of district representation, I could.

TSISMEMAKIS: By then the busing crisis had cooled down, but it still existed correct?

NUCCI: By the time I ran for and served on the school committee, the tensions were virtually gone in terms of the violence and the real emotional reaction to desegregation. The phenomenon known as white flight had also taken place in the Boston Public Schools. It was, by the time I was elected, a primarily minority population within the Boston Public Schools. So there was still great dissatisfaction, there was still great grumblings about how people were saying, “I will never send my child to the Boston Public Schools if he or she is going to be put on a bus and transported eleven miles every morning.” So that was still there, but the racial tensions were not as sharp.
TSISMENAKIS: Was it also something that you dealt with later, as a city councilor?

NUCCI: No, what happened is I served on the school committee at a very opportune time. We set as a priority—when I became president of the school committee in 1985 and continued to serve as president for four years—we, as a committee, set as a priority convincing the federal district court that the time had come to disengage, that the leadership of Boston was finally able to be trusted to never return to a consciously segregated school system. Ray Flynn\(^3\) had become mayor of the city of Boston, who made racial harmony a major platform in his campaign and in his administration. The expanded thirteen member school committee was now diverse. We had four minority members on the school committee, out of nine. It was a relatively progressive school committee, compared to school committees in the past twenty years. So we felt it was time, and we felt that we could reasonably convince Judge Garrity to say, “Okay, it’s time you get control back.”

By the time I left my presidency on the school committee—in 1985 in fact, Judge Garrity issued what he called his final orders. That’s when it was called *Morgan v. Nucci*,\(^4\) because I was president at the time, and those became the final orders of the desegregation case. They continued to be tweaked along the way since then, but the actual final orders were issued in 1985 [see attachments A and B]. And in those final orders, Judge Garrity wrote that he had, and I quote, “restored confidence” in the leadership of the city. And he mentioned myself and Ray Flynn by name; that’s probably one of the highlights of my entire professional career, that the federal district court recognized that the leadership of the city and the leadership of the school committee that I was leading, was responsible enough to end this madness.

So at that point in time, the school committee went back—went in to what we called the controlled choice, which meant that parents could, for the most part, select where their children would go to school, because we could not break entirely away from the court. There were some strings attached. There were some situations where racial balance had to be maintained, but most

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3 Raymond L. Flynn (1939–), a Democrat, represented South Boston in the Massachusetts State House of Representatives from 1971 to 1979. He later served on the Boston City Council from 1978 to 1974, then as mayor of Boston from 1984 to 1993.

parents by far received their first choice as to where their child went to school. All that means is that by time I went to the city council, this was really a non-issue. It had sort of gone by the boards. There was still some dissatisfaction that there wasn’t 100 percent parent choice, and there weren’t what people called neighborhood schools. The problem is that you can’t have neighborhood schools because there aren’t schools in every neighborhood. During the desegregation crisis, lots of schools were closed. So until we build a lot of schools, we’re never going to return to what people like to call neighborhood schools, so there’s always going to be some transporting of students.

TSISMENAKIS: When there was controlled choice, did you feel that white parents would choose mainly white schools for their children, and black parents—

NUCCI: No, no, no. I think what would happen is that no matter what the color of the skin, many parents want to choose the close school for their children and the best school for their child. Ironically, I went to school at a time when we had complete choice as to where we went to school. My parents did not choose to send me to the close school. I could have gone to the neighborhood school, which was East Boston High School. My parents chose to send me ten, twelve miles away at Boston Latin School, because it was the best available school. So I don’t believe parents choose the white school or the black school. I don’t even believe they have as the only priority the close school. I think they choose the best school, and that’s what I think they’re doing now.

TSISMENAKIS: When Judge Garrity decided to give back power to the Boston School Committee, did he set forth any criteria that had to be met?

NUCCI: Yeah, initially the message was, don’t go too fast too soon. Initially the message was, you’re right, you deserve to have control once again and you’ve impressed me with your sense of responsibility, but we’re going to do this slowly, which is why we went directly to controlled choice, where parents were given choice, but there were some strings left attached. If schools were getting entirely out of whack in racial balance, there were some safeguards built into the process. The problem with this was that it was a very complex formula,
a very complex process, that even the people running it didn’t understand. So most parents were getting their first choice, many were getting their second choice, and some weren’t getting either, and nobody could understand why because it was a very complex process. That’s why I think even to this day, there’s talk about simplifying it and saying choice, pure and simple, and nothing else.

**TSISMENAKIS:** What did people think was going to happen when they heard Judge Garrity was giving the power back to the school committee?

**NUCCI:** I think everybody felt that suddenly, there would be hordes of middle-class white families walking back into the city to attend the Boston Public Schools. That didn’t happen, and it didn’t happen because the phenomenon of white flight had a lot to do with the schools, but not entirely was it due to the schools. The American dream in the fifties and sixties and seventies was to buy a house in the suburbs with a white picket fence, and move out of the city. That trend has been reversed obviously. Those are the folks that are trying to get back into the city today, but can’t afford to do that. So I think people expected suddenly that every middle-class family that left the city was going to come barreling back in because Judge Garrity had returned choice to the schools. That didn’t happen. I think people expected that there would be a rapid, abrupt return to 100 percent parental choice, and the return of neighborhood schools, as a result of the re-entry of white families into the city. And that did not happen.

**TSISMENAKIS:** Tell me about the people that you served with on the committee.

**NUCCI:** I think that the people that served on the committee were extremely dedicated people. You don’t get rich serving on the Boston School Committee. I can tell you that it was the most thankless, punishing job I ever had, serving as president of the school committee, but I’d do it all over again, because of the learning experience and the importance of the position. The people that served on the school committee were good people, well-intentioned people. The structure of the school committee, however, made it very difficult for the committee to function effectively. The district nature of the Boston School Committee meant that parochialism crept in. You can’t govern a school system by strictly looking out for the interests of the neighborhood you
represent. That’s not the way school systems work. It’s the way government works, it’s the way Congress works, it’s the way the legislature works, it’s the way a city council works, because they’re legislative bodies. A school committee is a policy body, so I think that the people serving on this new district format of a school committee sometimes let parochialism creep in. Not because they’re bad people, because they felt that was their job to do that. And that I think was a real hindrance in making objective policy for the school system.

**TSISMENAKIS:** Were there any particular differences of opinion, instances where there was certainly one person in the group that had a strong stand on—

**NUCCI:** On the desegregation?

**TSISMENAKIS:** Right.

**NUCCI:** You know, I don’t think so. I think one of the good things about the school committee in those days was that we shared the same goal of wanting to convince Judge Garrity to basically leave the school system alone, and let us run it. With that in mind, we may have disagreed slightly on the process to get to that point, but we all had the common goal in getting to that point. I really do think that, with some exception, we were united in our focus to convince Judge Garrity to disengage the school system.

**TSISMENAKIS:** What issues did you focus on when you were on the school committee?

**NUCCI:** (laughs) Disengagement. I mean if there were three issues that I had as a priority as president of the school committee, they were disengagement of the federal district court, disengagement of the federal district court, and disengagement of the federal district court. I thought that was something that was attainable, and if we did it right, we would get there. And we did.

The other issue I thought that was important as president of the school committee was to look at the school system in Boston as more than just a place that kids go to during the school day. I
was trying to raise the consciousness of the fact that kids come into the Boston Public Schools, or any other urban school system, with an awful lot of baggage. They come from conditions of economic and domestic turmoil, they come from conditions that are not conducive to learning, that in fact create barriers to learning. So that when they get to the schoolhouse door every morning, they’re just not ready to learn.

I tried to begin the discussion and the debate of turning the schools into more of a learning place, but also a place that meets their social needs as well, by extending the school day, bringing counseling and services into the school. We were the first school committee to approve health clinics in the school system. Health clinics, in fact, that were dealing with things like contraception and birth control, and distribution of condoms. Very controversial in a city like Boston, as you might imagine, and I got a lot of grief for supporting distribution of condoms, but at the time, we had soaring teenage pregnancy rates, which affect learning. We had the advent of the AIDS crisis, and I thought it was the right thing to do, and we did it. So I was trying to expand on how people were looking at the schools, as more than just a place where people learn reading, writing, and arithmetic.

TSISMENAKIS: Did the system of the health clinics work? Is it something that—

NUCCI: Oh yeah, they’re still there, they’re still there. And other cities are doing it now too, and small towns are doing it now too. But we were one of the first to propose that.

TSISMENAKIS: Do you think that the city of Boston looks at the issue differently today, of busing and desegregation?

NUCCI: No. I think if you were doing word association and you said the word “busing” to any Bostonian, their first words would be, “bad idea.” And there’s validity to that. The need for something to be done by the federal district court is undeniable; they had to do something. The remedy. I think, is universally accepted as something that probably didn’t make life any better in the city or in the schools.
TSISMEANAKIS: Are current racial relations in Boston better now?

NUCCI: They’re light-years ahead of where they ever were. But you know something? That’s also true everywhere. Not only has Boston grown as a city, but we’ve grown as a culture and a society to be more tolerant and accepting of people who don’t look like us. But there’s no question that you could go into every single neighborhood in the city of Boston today and see diversity. Every neighborhood. Which is why you can go back to controlled—I’m sorry, to parental choice, because no matter where you to school, you’re going to be sitting next to children of diverse backgrounds, because very neighborhood is diverse. I grew up in East Boston, which was probably, growing up, 90 to 95 percent Italian or Irish. Today, it’s a majority Hispanic neighborhood. That can’t help but make the racial climate more healthy.

TSISMEANAKIS: So you definitely think that the events that resulted from the Garrity decision left a stigma on the city of Boston?

NUCCI: Oh, I think because Boston was so blanketed with media coverage, not just locally, but on the national sphere, a perception of Boston was created as a racially intolerant city, that I think still exists, though not anywhere near the degree it used to. The validity of that perception is nothing near what it used to be. Some may argue that was a valid rap that Boston was getting back then, but it’s not now. But you know, sometimes you hear professional athletes talk about not wanting to play in Boston because of the racial climate. That’s silly. That sort of racial tension doesn’t exist anymore. It’s just not there, except to the degree that it exists everywhere. Discrimination is not gone, it hasn’t been wiped from the face of the Earth. It exists. But it exists in Boston just as it exists in Detroit, just as it exists in Beverly Hills.

TSISMEANAKIS: What would you say is the picture of the Boston Public School system today? What are their main policies? What do they like to portray?
NUCCI: I think the system has been portraying itself and is in fact making slow and steady progress on many fronts. I think it’s making progress in MCAS\textsuperscript{5} scores, it’s making progress in dropout rates, and I think it’s becoming a system that is growing in attractiveness to all types of people, whether they be white, black, poor, or rich. It is still a majority minority school system, as urban school systems usually are. Public school systems, particularly urban school systems, face challenges that private schools don’t face, so there’s always going to be a discrepancy in achievement and funding. Private schools get to pick and choose who goes to their schools. Public schools don’t get to do that; they have to provide an education to every child who shows up to the schoolhouse door, regardless of their disability, regardless of the conditions from which they are coming before they get to school. So those are the challenges that Boston faces, that I think every urban school system faces. Boston is doing as well as any urban school system in the country in dealing with those challenges.

TSISMENAKIS: There had been a recent article in a newspaper, and I believe a Boston city councilman actually suggested that the funds that are put towards busing, should be appropriated towards more active policing in the neighborhoods.

NUCCI: That’s simplistic. Plain and simple. I think it’s well-intended, but simplistic. What is busing? Busing exists in every city and suburb in the country. When children have to get on a bus because their school is not within walking distance, that’s busing. So until we have schools in every neighborhood of the city, so that every child can walk with their two little feet to school each morning, we’re going to need to have those yellow school buses in the city. So you can’t just drop them off a cliff, and say, “Okay, now we’re just going to spend that money for police.” It can’t happen. Whether busing is taking place for desegregation purposes, or just simple, plain old transportation purposes, a city like Boston is always going to transportation costs. Could they be reduced? Perhaps, with some efficiency measures, but not eliminated.

\textsuperscript{5} MCAS refers to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, which includes a standardized test that all public school students must pass in order to graduate high school.
TSISMENAKIS: What do you think of some reports that have said that there are some schools in Boston that don’t have a sufficient amount of textbooks for their students, older textbooks, older schools, crumbling buildings? What’s the solution?

NUCCI: Public education is very expensive, and we, not just Boston, we as a society don’t always monitor it they way we should. People talk about per person, per pupil expenditures, what it costs per pupil to educate in a school system, and they compare public education with private education. What they do is they take the budget of a school, in private and public, and divide the number of students, and say, Aha! There’s your per pupil expenditure. But that’s not the case in public schools systems, because public schools have the obligation to educate every child that shows up, it can cost up to 250,000 to 300,000 dollars to educate one student, sometimes, with a severe learning disability, or a severe physical disability. That eats up a lot of dollars that aren’t available for things like textbooks, and athletic programs, and soccer team uniforms. You can’t compare school systems that are educating young people without physical and mental disabilities and barriers to learning, to school systems that aren’t. The school systems that are have to use up a lot of money to deal with those barriers.

TSISMENAKIS: Is it true that Massachusetts is one of the states that has a higher per pupil learning expenditure?

NUCCI: I don’t know. I don’t know, to be honest with you.

TSISMENAKIS: Do you have anything else you’d like to add?

NUCCI: No, I think we’ve done a great job.

TSISMENAKIS: Alright, very good. Thank you very much, it was a great opportunity.

END OF INTERVIEW
OH-059 Attachments

Attachment B  Text of *Morgan v. Nucci* 831 F.2nd 313 (1st Cir. 1987)