

READING

Chinese American Families Boycott the Schools

Adapted from Deanna Pan, "They Did It for Their Children": Inside the Forgotten Story of a Group of Chinatown Mothers Who Mobilized during Boston's Busing Crisis," Boston Globe, September 18, 2022 (accessed July 21, 2023).

During the first year of desegregation, the 1974–75 school year, about 200 Chinese middle and high school students were bused from Chinatown to new schools. Most went to school in the North End. While this was likely a stressful change for students from Chinatown, there were no reports of protests or violence toward the Chinese students who went to the North End. The younger, elementary students from Chinatown were not sent to new schools that year.

During the second year of desegregation, the 1975–76 school year, 1,000 Chinese students would be sent to schools outside of Chinatown, including elementary school children for the first time. The letters that the school system sent to Chinese families telling them where their children would go to school were written only in English, which many families did not understand. Some Chinese mothers asked a bilingual education teacher named Suzanne Lee for help understanding the information they had received. Lee had just finished her first year as a teacher at the Josiah Quincy Elementary School in Chinatown. She also taught English to Chinese adults on weekends.

Many of the Chinese students were assigned to schools in Charlestown for the 1975–76 school year. This made parents nervous because one month before James and George Tam, two teenage immigrants from Hong Kong, had been charged with the murder of Patrice Borden, a white girl, in Charlestown. The Chinese parents worried that the people in Charlestown would threaten or harm their children going to school there in retaliation. (A year later, the two teenagers were found innocent of all charges in the murder.)

With Suzanne Lee's support, a group of Chinese mothers formed the Boston Chinese Parents Association (BCPA) to seek support and protection for their children who would be sent on buses to schools in other neighborhoods like Charlestown and the North End. Before long,

the BCPA had hundreds of members. They sent letters to Judge Garrity and Boston school officials expressing their concerns, but they never received any responses. They asked a group of Chinese businessmen in their community for help, but they were turned down.

The Chinese parents decided to speak out by themselves. On July 30, 1975, they issued a list of demands to the Boston School Committee. They wanted:

- Chinese students to be sent only to schools where there were a minimum number of other Chinese students, teachers, and aides
- Chinese adults to accompany Chinese students on buses to schools in other neighborhoods
- Security at bus stops
- Schools to have staff members who could communicate with parents in Chinese.

In response to their list of demands, the Boston School Committee agreed to meet with them. But at the meeting, some members of the school committee treated the Chinese parents disrespectfully by making fun of how they spoke, and others gave no promises to help.

Finally, the night before the first day of classes in 1975, the BCPA voted to boycott the schools. They asked Chinese parents to keep their children home on the first day of school. More than 90 percent of Chinese students assigned to schools outside of Chinatown did not go to school that day.

The boycott finally got the attention of government and school leaders. A representative from the United States government (the Department of Justice) asked Suzanne Lee to set up a meeting with the Boston Chinese Parents Association to discuss how to end the boycott. They met two days later, and the government official pledged to meet almost all of the parents' demands. After three days, the boycott ended.

At the end of the meeting, the government official said to Lee that the schools needed the Chinese students to return so that they could be a "buffer" between the Black and white children. This comment angered Lee.

"This is what we are worth in the eyes of people who have power. They're not concerned about getting kids back because they need education," Lee said. "We are nobody until they need us for something."

But the parents' boycott was an important moment for the Chinese community in Boston. "Initially, everybody ignored them," said Michael Liu, an activist and author. But the boycott "let [those in power] know that there's a Chinese community and they need to be paid attention to."