

BLACK HISTORY

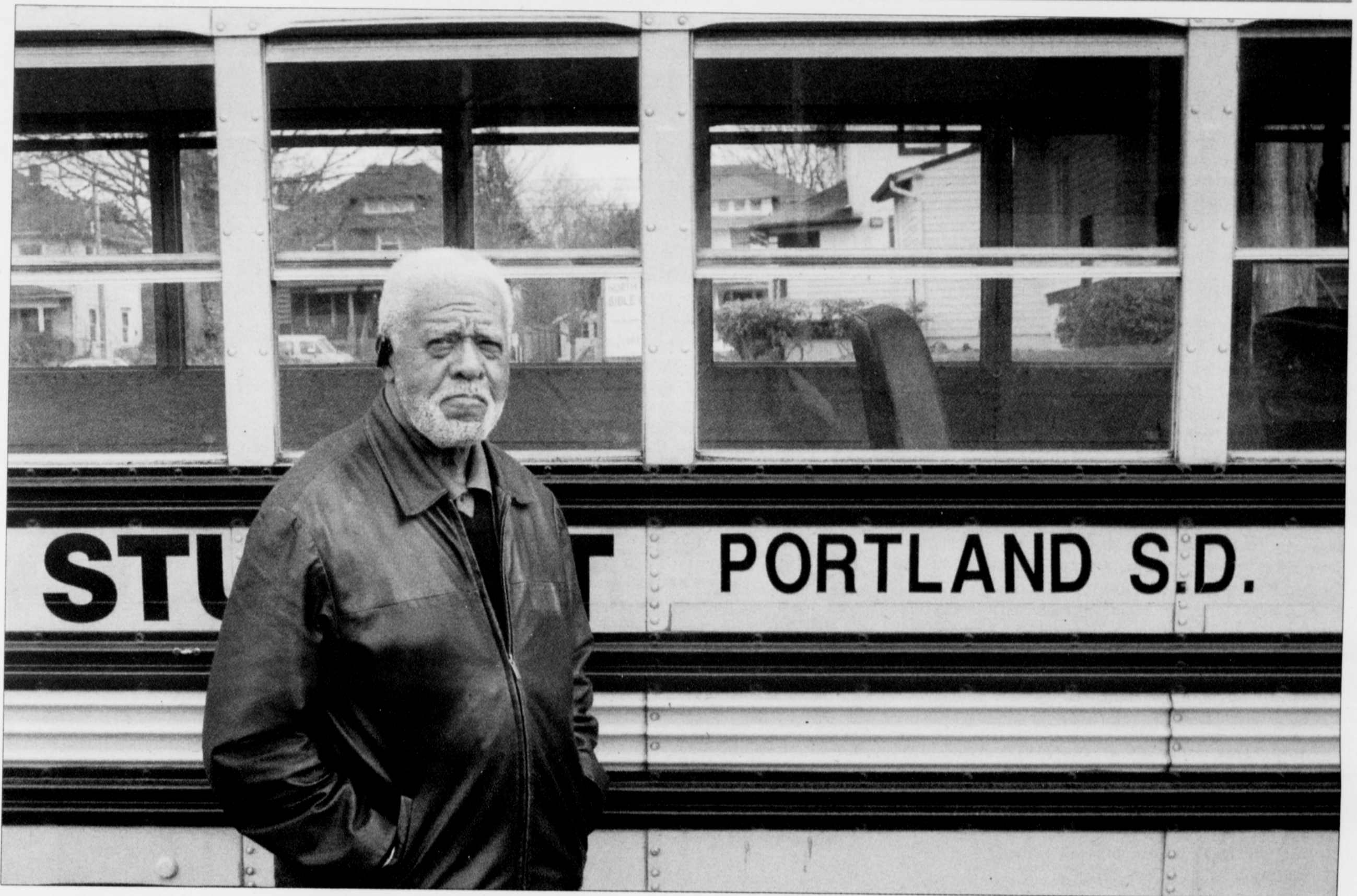


PHOTO BY JAKE THOMAS/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Ernest Hartzog, a former Portland Public Schools assistant superintendent who was involved in efforts to desegregate schools, stands next to a bus outside of Humboldt Elementary in northeast Portland.

A Campaign for Equity in School

continued ▲ from Front

minority children being stuck in underperforming inner-city schools and called the problem "a cultural and racial disservice to the entire community."

At the time, most of Portland's black population was concentrated in north and northeast portions of the city, particularly the Albina community, and the schools serving that population didn't have the same resources as their more affluent suburban counterparts.

After coming under pressure, the school district turned its focus to improving the quality of education in inner-city schools -- transforming some into magnets-while taking steps to encourage racial integration district wide.

Ernest Hartzog, who served as PPS assistant superintendent, oversaw the district's early efforts to bring more diversity and equity to schools in the 1970s.

"It was doomed to failure," said

Hartzog bluntly of the district's effort.

According to Hartzog, the problem with the district's plan to integrate schools was that it depended on parents voluntarily busing their children across town.

Many white parents were reluctant to send their children to the inner city, leaving the burden to fall largely on black families.

"It was a one way situation," he said.

There were other problems associated with the efforts, as educators and administrators struggled to deal with an influx of students from a different part of town, said Hartzog.

Hartzog recalls a tense atmosphere, "loaded with emotions." Fights broke out at sporting events. Black parents complained that their children were being unfairly treated. There were threats of lawsuits and actual lawsuits. Hartzog remembers a police officers being stationed in schools, which he described as a welcome presence.

Black parents were also rankled by district plan to keep students from the Boise Neighborhood from transferring to Jefferson High School, and the Black United Fund raised a ruckus at school board meetings, with organizers jumping on tables, because of the disproportionate burden on African American families.

By 1980, Hartzog had stepped down from his position, as PPS passed a series of resolutions that tried to monitor it better, make the burden more equitable, and placed it under the direct control of Superintendent Matthew Prophet.

During the 1980s, the district gave additional money and teachers to schools with concentrations of minorities and established magnet programs in them. It then made it easier for students to transfer, and assumed that integration would happen by choice.

The district's efforts had some success. In 1966 there were only 388 transfers. In 1980, there were 4,961,

according to PPS records.

But schools seem to have gravitated back to being divided along racial lines, with minorities concentrated in certain schools. For instance, Jefferson High School is 57 percent black.

PPS is currently in the midst of an ambitious redesign of its high school system that seeks to make course offerings at each high school more equitable and close the achievement gap. The plan will severely limit transfers, requiring students to attend their neighborhood school.

Carole Smith, PPS superintendent, said that restricting transfers will bolster diversity throughout schools.

"I would not call what we're doing desegregation," stressed Smith, who once worked on efforts to integrate Boston public schools in the 1980s. She added that mixing students from different ethnic and social backgrounds improves success across the board, which she hopes to do with the redesign.

In 2007, the Supreme Court issued a ruling prohibiting schools from using race as a factor in school choice, essentially ending mandatory busing programs in other parts of the country.

But busing might not be the best way to achieve parity and diversity.

"It does come down to relationships," said Smith, who explained that moving people around town will make little difference if students don't feel welcome and part of the community their attending school in.

Hartzog adds that it means little if schools are the only place that are integrated.

"If you don't have racial equality and parity in the work place, and the church place, and neighborhoods, why should we think it works in the school place? What happens is people mirror and reflect what they learn in segregated living," he said.

"The jury is still out on what the best way to do this is," he added.