

ELIMINATING SEGREGATION
IN NEW JERSEY PUBLIC SCHOOLS .

A Review of Methods Employed by Local Boards of Education

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We in New Jersey frequently are asked, "How may desegregation in a public school system be accomplished with a minimum of difficulty". It should be established at the outset that there is no panacea for the solution to this problem. However, some of the problems and pitfalls which face an administrator attempting to integrate a segregated school system may be avoided by a review of the methods and techniques used in various communities in the State of New Jersey in complying with the provisions of a new state constitution, adopted in 1947, which outlawed segregation in the public schools.

As a starting point leading to the ultimate elimination of segregated schools in New Jersey, an objective survey was made of all school districts in the State known to have Negro enrollments. The purpose of the survey was to determine how many school buildings in each school district had all-colored enrollments. In addition, the survey permitted an insight into the number of school buildings there were in each district, the capacity of each building, grade levels housed there, what the enrollment (white or colored) was at the moment, plus the number of teachers (white or colored) assigned to each building. This survey also included inquiries relative to district boundary lines, pupil transfer practices, bus transportation, etc.

As a result of this survey, officials were able to determine that there were fifty-two school districts in the State which contained one or more school buildings with all-colored student bodies and faculties. Field representatives of the State Department of Education, Division Against Discrimination, visited each of the school buildings with all-colored enrollments, in the

fifty-two school districts, for the purpose of determining if the all-colored enrollments were the result of the geographical location of the school buildings or purposive segregation. These visitations developed the fact that the all-colored school buildings in nine of the fifty-two districts were geographically located in Negro sections of the communities, the majority of these schools being small neighborhood two or four room schools. The remaining forty-three school districts were, in the opinion of state officials, deliberately segregating pupils in their elementary schools by race. It is interesting to note that all of the school districts having senior high schools, operated them on a plan of racial integration of pupils, but with complete exclusion of Negro teachers.

The forty-three school districts were faced with the problem of eliminating the segregation of pupils on the elementary level in order to conform with the provisions of the new State Constitution. How this was done in three different types of communities will serve as a helpful guide to any area undertaking the desegregation of pupils in a public school system. The communities to be discussed involve the following types: (1) a fair-sized rural county seat, (2) a very high economic level suburban community, and (3) a large industrial city.

It should be explained that the State Commissioner of Education studied the data collected by the Division Against Discrimination in their survey of districts known to have segregated schools. On the basis of this information, communications were then sent to each school district in such a manner as to convey the State Commissioner's recognition of the legal requirements imposed upon them by the new Constitution. The moral obligation of educators and local school officials in carrying out the principles of the new constitution was emphasized by the Commissioner in the same communication.

This statement of official policy on the state level was a necessary first step in the elimination of segregated schools in New Jersey.

Therefore, in the fair-sized rural county seat, the problem of integrating both Negro students and teachers was faced squarely and courageously by the Board of Education and the School Superintendent. Early in May of 1948, the school board voted to eliminate segregation in its schools. The school system was composed of one Negro elementary school, two white elementary schools, a junior high school and a senior high school. All of the elementary schools were located relatively close to each other and there were no boundary lines since the town comprised one school district. All students traveled to school on foot, thus eliminating transportation problems. The Negro and white residents were mixed, from a housing standpoint, and all of the Negro teachers were held in high regard by the majority of the townspeople. The Board of Education decided that, inasmuch as nonsegregation was the mandate of the people of the State of New Jersey, it would be best merely to announce the abolition of segregation, during the summer and without fanfare or explanation. This was done in order that there would be a minimum of opportunity for invitations to incitement among the people of the city. The attitude taken was simply that it was the Law and the school administrators were pledged to carry out the Law. Special faculty meetings were held and all teachers were asked to cooperate in every way possible and assist in bringing the integration project to a successful conclusion. It should be noted that many white citizens in the city had expressed dislike of the idea of integration, but no organized opposition was offered.

The all-colored school building had formerly contained classes of kindergarten through the sixth grade. As of September 1948, it was scheduled to house grades two and six. The Negro teachers were distributed throughout

the other schools, including the high school, with but one exception. One of the Negro teachers was retained in the former all-colored school as Principal over five white teachers. When school opened in September of 1948, the integration program went into effect smoothly and efficiently. There were no repercussions of any kind and the community reaction was excellent. The school administrator reported only one disgruntled parent who insisted upon sending his child to another town and school. It is not implied that all parents were happy, however, the large majority seemed to stress the point that their real desire was to have their children under an excellent teacher and that the color of the teacher's skin was not an important factor. The community was fortunate in having respected Negro teachers who were well known and had demonstrated their teaching ability to the satisfaction of interested citizens. The elimination of segregated schools in this community was successfully accomplished in the shortest possible time.

In the very high economic-level suburban community, the school system was comprised of a senior high school and two elementary schools. The senior high school classes were completely integrated, while one of the elementary schools was all-colored in its enrollment and teaching force. The remaining elementary school had an all-white faculty and a student population of approximately six hundred and fifty pupils, half dozen of whom were Negro children.

The local Board of Education started to consider the problem of desegregation in November of 1947, immediately following the public approval of the new state constitution. In April 1948, the Board of Education placed a general notice in the local paper stating that the segregated school in their city was to be eliminated as of September. Letters were also sent

to the parents of all the children who would be involved in the integration of the two elementary schools, advising them of the decision of the Board and inviting them to attend a public meeting at which time the manner in which the integration was to be carried out, would be explained. The school administrator held meetings with his faculty on the afternoon prior to the scheduled public meetings and enlisted their support and cooperation in carrying out the plans for desegregation.

At the public meetings, parents were advised that as of September the all-white school would become an integrated primary school with kindergarten through the fifth grade classes being taught in that school by an integrated faculty. The former all-colored school would be turned into an intermediate grade school with the sixth, seventh and eighth grades with an integrated faculty. The Board announced the appointment of a Negro principal and a white vice-principal to take charge of the intermediate grade school. As a further step in integrating their schools, the Board saw fit to assign one of the Negro teachers to the high school to teach English.

While attendance was good at these meetings, it should be reported there were some objections to the plans of the Board by a few parents. However, the objections were minor and the plans were carried to conclusion with a minimum of difficulty. It should be further explained that two such meetings were held, one each for the parents of the effected schools on separate nights. The minor objections to the plans were comparable on both occasions. White parents voiced minor fears as to the effect of the integration on their children, and Negro parents voiced similar fears as to the effect upon the Negro children.

It should be mentioned here, that one condition was present in this wealthy community that some people thought would be an important factor. This was the availability of several excellent private schools in the immediate area and a very good parochial school located in the heart of the town. In September of 1948, when the plans went into operation, it is reported that seven white families transferred their children to either private or parochial schools. This transfer of children was negligible considering that close to one thousand children were involved in the transition. Of further interest, was the discovery that five of the seven families returned their children to the public schools the following year. One human interest situation revolved around a white student whose parents wanted him sent to a private school. The child objected to the transfer and flatly refused to go to the private school. His objections were so strong, it was obvious that he would be most unhappy if the parents forced their will upon him. The family gave up their efforts and the boy continued his education in the integrated public school system, completely happy and probably richer in human understanding.

Before concluding the report of integration in this suburban community, one final effect should be reported. Prior to school opening the year following initial integration, the school administrator was contacted by a number of white parents who requested that their children be assigned to classes taught by a Negro teacher. The one year's experience in integration had demonstrated to the citizens of this community that teaching ability was not measured by the color of a person's skin.

The third school system involves a large industrial city with two senior high schools, several junior high schools and over thirty elementary schools.

Negro students were completely integrated on the senior and junior high school levels; however, examination of the elementary schools showed

about seven of these were all-colored, both in pupil population and faculty composition. Approximately thirteen schools were all-white in pupil enrollment and faculty assignments. The remaining buildings, while classified as "mixed" in class attendance, deserve close scrutiny in order to expose the degree to which students were actually "mixed". Four of this group had one Negro student each, two had a Negro enrollment totaling six, or three per school; and two were found to have two Negroes in one school and five in another. The remaining schools might objectively be considered integrated as it was ascertained that Negro representation on the student rolls amounted to a fair percentage of the total enrollment. In one school with over two hundred and fifty students, approximately forty Negro children were included. Over seventy-five Negro youngsters were found in a school with an enrollment of almost three hundred and fifty pupils; and in the third building the student body amounted to about four hundred and fifty children, of whom almost seventy were Negro. The close scrutiny suggested, therefore, develops the fact that approximately one hundred and eighty Negro students were concentrated in three of the eleven "mixed" schools; while the remaining eleven Negro pupils were scattered throughout eight other "mixed" student groups.

The problem which presented itself to the Board of Education and school administrators in this city was a complex one involving the elimination of seven all-colored schools housing over twenty-three hundred students and more than eighty Negro teachers.

The Board of Education in this city issued a fine declaration of policy early in the Spring of 1948, stating that they intended to eliminate segregation in the schools as of September 1948. Immediately following this public statement, the Board appointed a Special Committee to study the segregation of schools in the city and make recommendations to the Board as to

how they might best be eliminated. This committee was composed of board members, school administrators and teachers.

The Board appropriated money for the purpose of sending teachers to the Rutgers Six Week Workshop in Human Relations during the summer of 1948. These teachers were selected by the Superintendent of Schools and charged with the responsibility of returning to the city with as many aids, techniques and methods of integration as was possible.

A survey of teachers in the city was made to determine the extent of interest in an Extension Course in the Foundations of Human Relations which was being planned locally for the coming Fall. The completed survey showed that approximately seventy-five teachers, both white and colored, were exceedingly interested and willing to enroll in such a course.

The Special Committee appointed by the Board met several times as a full committee and approved the recommendations for a solution to the de-segregation problem made by several sub-committees which had been working diligently on assignments given them by the full committee. These recommendations included elimination of the existing school zones, establishment of new zones, integration of faculties, methods of handling parental complaints, closing two buildings, etc. The approved recommendations were presented to the Board of Education by the Special Committee at one of the Board meetings just prior to the summer vacation period.

Thus far, the actions of the Board of Education had been commendable. It appeared that the integration problem was being approached with intelligence, courage and complete objectivity. However, at this point in the experience of this city, something happened to the Board members. At one of the summer meetings, the Board of Education failed to adopt the recommendations of the Special

Committee, and instead, adopted another plan which opened with a fine declaration concerning segregation and their intent to eliminate the present conditions. The resolution adopted by the Board at that particular meeting revised school boundaries and set up regulations relating to school attendance in the new districts. The resolution, in essence, stated that all pupils and new entrants in the elementary schools must enroll and subsequently attend the school designated for their particular district under the newly revised elementary school boundaries.

It may be safe to assume that, had the resolution been terminated at that point, the integration of schools in the city would have been accomplished with a minimum of administrative difficulty, as was proven in numerous other cities and communities going through the same experience of desegregation.

The Board of Education, however, for some unknown reason, saw fit to include an additional section in their resolution which permitted parents to make application prior to September, for their children to continue in the school they had been attending, until they had completed the elementary grades housed in that particular building. It appeared as obvious to everyone interested in the successful integration of this school system, that the Board had provided an out for any white parent who did not wish his child to attend any of the former all-colored schools. Strong objection to this section of the resolution was voiced at the meeting, and the Board members promised that they would change the objectionable sections at their next meeting. This promise was not fulfilled, with the result that one of the interested organizations threatened court action. In addition, during the interim, the State Department of Education strongly urged the Board to restudy its plans and present evidence of a type that would indicate that the problem of integration was being solved permanently as of September. Faced with such staunch resistance

to their resolution late in the summer, the Board found that it was impossible to effect another change in plan for the practical reasons that book and equipment orders for all of the schools were already in, assorted and allocated. To reroute these orders, as would be necessary were complete integration put into effect, inestimable clerical and administrative work would be necessary. It was impossible to attempt this task due to the vacation schedules set up for the staff at that time. The end result of this vacillation on the part of the school board was that only partial desegregation was accomplished by September 1948. The token integration satisfied interested persons only after positive assurances were made by the Board of Education that complete desegregation would be a reality by September of 1949.

During the year that followed, the Extension Course in the Foundations of Human Relations was held, additional teachers were sent to the Rutgers Six Week Workshop in Human Relations and an intensive program of Negro and white teacher-teacher and principal-teacher understanding was carried on in order to prepare the entire school system for complete integration. Social teas were held, giving faculty members from the different schools an opportunity to become better acquainted. An exchange of assembly programs was carried out with encouraging success.

In September 1949, this city completed the major portions of its desegregation program. It was found that there were small areas in which slight changes in plans were necessary and the balance of the year found administrators faced with only minor problems which were easily solved due to a more forthright intention to overcome all the obstacles which appeared to hamper the progress towards a complete integration.

The foregoing general description of the experiences of three individual communities permits some insight into the complexities of a desegregation program. Many local experiences disclosed comparable problems in the remaining forty school districts involved in the statewide desegregation that took place during the years of 1948 and 1949. It can be reported, however, that similar techniques were used by school officials in the different school districts. In some communities the integration program permitted the closing of two and four room schools. In other cities, old school buildings were also closed. In a few of these instances, teachers not under tenure, both Negro and white, were no longer needed and money was saved as a result. In most cases, however, the normal occurrence of faculty replacements created positions for teachers who might have been released due to the desegregation program. In some areas, the necessity of white children attending integrated classes in a former all-colored school building, which was in poor condition, enabled school administrators to develop strong support for building programs that resulted in districts obtaining modern consolidated schools. Here were perfect examples of racial desegregation having served to improve the entire community school program.

One device used quite frequently to overcome some of the obvious problems present in desegregation was as follows: In a building which housed two first grades, two second and two third grades, a white and colored teacher were teamed up. The individual groups of children were taught by a white teacher in the first grade, a colored teacher in the second grade, a white teacher in the third grade, or vice versa and so on through the elementary grades. Another device used in some communities was to place all Negro teachers in a given trade, such as third grade, throughout the entire school

system. In that way, every child in the third grade, in that community, had a Negro teacher. Many communities merely assigned their Negro teachers to the same grades in the new set up that they had been teaching in the all-colored school. Numerous school officials, when asked, seemed to think that while the technique used in their community helped solve their problem, they were not positive that some other method or technique, or no device at all might have solved the situation just as well.

In conclusion, therefore, it is safe to say that the following policies and attitudes must be a part of any desegregation program undertaken in any community, whether it be large or small. First, there must be some legal authority giving initial impetus to an integration program. Second, an objective survey of all installations, faculties, pupil compositions and community attitudes should be made. Third, and perhaps most important, once the decision to desegregate is made, the carrying out of the plans made must be done in a positive manner with no deviation, apology, exception or vacillation whatsoever. If these three major suggestions are carried out, the successful experiences of over forty school districts in the State of New Jersey indicate that the integration of white and colored school systems can be accomplished to the satisfaction of all the people affected.