SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN KIRKWOOD, MISSOURI

A STAFF REPORT OF
THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION
ON CIVIL RIGHTS

July 1977

U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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- Study and collect information concerning legal developments constituting a denial of equal protection of the laws under the Constitution because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, or in the administration of justice;
- Appraise Federal laws and policies with respect to equal protection of the laws because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, or in the administration of justice;
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PREFACE

The United States Commission on Civil Rights released on August 24, 1976, its report to the Nation: Fulfilling the Letter and Spirit of the Law: Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools.

The report's findings and recommendations were based upon information gathered during a 10-month school desegregation project. This included four formal hearings (Boston, Massachusetts; Denver, Colorado; Louisville, Kentucky; and Tampa, Florida); four open meetings held by State Advisory Committees (Berkeley, California; Corpus Christi, Texas; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Stamford, Connecticut); a survey of nearly 1,300 local school districts; and 29 case studies of communities which had difficulties with desegregation, had moderate success with desegregation, or had substantial success with desegregation.

Subsequent to the report's release, considerable interest was generated concerning the specifics of the case study findings, which, owing to space limitations in the national report, were limited to a few brief paragraphs. In an effort to comply with public requests for more detailed information, Commission staff have prepared monographs for each of the case studies. These monographs were written from the extensive field notes already collected and supplemented, if needed, with further interviews in each community. They reflect, in detail, the original case study purpose of finding which local policies, practices, and programs in each community surveyed contributed to peaceful desegregation and which ones did not.

It is hoped that the following monograph will serve to further an understanding of the school desegregation process in this Nation.

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II. FROM SEGREGATION TO DESEGREGATION

In fall 1976 total student enrollment in Kirkwood R-7 school district, which draws pupils from the cities of Des Peres, Frontenac, and Glendale, and from some unincorporated portions of the county as well as from Kirkwood, was 6,431, of whom 12.9 percent were minority, predominantly black. Of the 402 teachers and administrators, approximately 9.7 percent were minority. The district's 10 schools included 7 elementary schools, 1 middle school (grades 6-7), 1 center (grades 8-9), and 1 high school (grades 10-12).

The Dual School System

The Missouri Constitution of 1875 specified that school districts were to maintain dual school systems. This provision was renewed in the 1945 constitution and was not repealed until August 1976.

In 1908 all black primary school students in the district attended the Booker T. Washington School. Requests by black parents that a second school be opened in the Meacham Park area were not approved.[4]

In 1914 Washington School was damaged by fire. A two-room portable school was then placed in the Meacham Park area for the use of black children. Five years later, the damaged Washington School was still the only permanent school for blacks.[5] Further, education for blacks ended with the eighth grade. In August 1919 the local League of Women Voters protested such "inadequate educational opportunity" for black children.

In spring of 1925 Meacham Park School opened for black elementary students, with an enrollment of 230. High school students went to all-black schools in St. Louis, approximately 20 miles distant. Meacham Park School was renamed J. Milton Turner School in 1932. When Washington School was finally closed in 1950, Turner became the only

black elementary school. The school board did not act on parents' protests against the closing of Washington and the consequent busing of their children to Turner.[6]

Pressure To Desegregate

In December 1950 black parents brought suit challenging the constitutionality of the dual school system.

On June 16, 1954, the U.S. Court of Appeals, citing the recent Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education outlawing dual school systems, upheld the plaintiffs and ordered the school system desegregated.[7] Elementary schools were integrated in September 1954 and secondary schools the next year. "Natural attendance boundaries were set and children attended schools based on logical neighborhood boundaries regardless of color."[8]

In 1958 North Junior High School was opened to supplement Nipher Junior High School, where most of the black students in grades 7-9 went. However, most minority students continued to attend Nipher, raising the proportion of minority students there well above the district average of 12 percent. North never had more than a tiny fraction of minority students.[9]

In 1968, to prevent disproportionately high minority enrollment at Rose Hill Elementary School, that school was paired with predominantly white Robinson Elementary School by the designation of a joint attendance zone. A suit lodged against the district in opposition to the proposed transfer of students was unsuccessful.

Turner Elementary School continued to be predominantly black. An August 1972 review by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, suggested that Rose Hill, Robinson, Pitman, and Hough Schools--all near Turner School--were schools to which minority students from Turner might be sent, as well as possible sources of white pupils for the desegregation of Turner. OCR pointed out that mere rezoning would increase the walking distances for black students disproportionately above that for white students. Black parents were reportedly already concerned about the distances between Robinson and Rose Hill, the paired schools. The district was ready to consider a 40 percent minority enrollment at each of the four schools nearest the black community as an

appropriate solution to racial isolation. There was no discussion of transportation schemes as alternatives.[10]

In April 1973 the regional office of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) wrote to the Kirkwood R-7 School District requiring the district to rebut or explain the substantial racial disproportion "in one or more of the district's schools."[11] Turner Elementary School was specifically the problem. In its response, the district noted the appointment of a biracial interpersonal relations committee and promised that action would be taken in the 1974-75 school year.[12] The committee's recommendations for dealing with this matter were held in abeyance pending the formalization of action plans in response to the 1973 OCR concern.[13]

In 1973-74, one junior high school and four elementary schools had substantial minority enrollments. The black student population was constant while the white enrollment was rapidly declining.[14] The prospect was therefore that minority proportions would increase at those five schools already near the OCR margin of acceptability while other schools with white populations underwent enrollment declines. Faculty were similarly concentrated (see table 1). These patterns were expected to invite legal challenge if left unaltered.

With the arrival of Dr. Raymond D. Waier as superintendent of schools on July 1, 1974, progress toward desegregation resumed. Superintendent Waier emphasized that "racial imbalances exist in our schools that the courts and society consider to be educationally and socially unsound."[15] On July 22, the school board agreed to make a decision on reorganizing the district "on or before February 18, 1975."[16] (Table 2 shows the minority composition of the Kirkwood district's schools in the 1974-75 school year.) On November 20, 1974, the district was again approached by the Office for Civil Rights on the matter of segregation. On December 5, district representatives met with OCR officials and the district was ordered to produce a desegregation plan by December 20, 1974. On December 20, the district requested a delay until March 1, 1975, which was granted.[17]

TABLE 1

Proportion of Minority Staff Before and After Desegregation
(In Percents)

	1974-75	1975-76
Kirkwood Senior High	5	7
North Junior High	0	6
Nipher (Junior/Middle)	8	8
Tillman	5	4
Hough	6	16
Pitman	17	29
Glendale	0	0
Keysor	5	12
Westchester	6	5

Thirteen minority teachers assigned to schools closed under the plan are included in the 1975-76 counts.

SOURCE: Data supplied by Kirkwood School District R-7.

TABLE 2

Minority Composition of Schools, 1974-75

School	Minority Students (%)
Kirkwood Senior	10.5
Nipher Junior	23.0
North Kirkwood Junior	2.1
Des Peres	0.0
Hough	9.2
Keysor	1.5
North Glendale	0.0
Osage	0.0
Pitman	25.0
Robinson/Rose Hill	28.9
Tillman	1.8
Turner	99.5
Westchester	0.9
System Total	12.5

Source: Kirkwood School District

III. THE PLAN

On February 18, 1975, the school board adopted unanimously a desegregation plan that provided for the elimination of racial isolation and all vestiges of the district's traditional dual school system. On April 1, 1975, the Office for Civil Rights accepted the plan.[18]

The Kirkwood plan was designed not only to correct racial isolation but also to effect curriculum reform and meet fiscal constraints. Factors involved in the design of the plan included declining enrollment (part of a national trend), budget deficits and decreasing revenue, and the desire to reorganize junior high schools (grades 7-9) into middle schools (grades 6-8) and institute new teaching methods in order to improve the quality of education. The financial benefits were emphasized as a justification for the reorganization.

Four primary schools--Turner, Pitman, Des Peres, and Osage Hills--were to be closed under the plan. Turner would become a neighborhood community service facility. The district had selected these schools by three criteria: (1) suitability of the plant in terms of size, condition, age, and location; (2) the ease of maintaining "neighborhood schools" in adjusting boundaries; and (3) the degree to which the "building will assist in improvement of the required minority-to-majority balances without undue hardship to either the black or white population."[19] As the result of the closings, all the black pupils from Turner would have to go elsewhere, and children at nine other schools would be transferred in such a way as to ensure minimal isolation. The consequence would be an increase in minority enrollment at Keysor, Hough, and Tillman, which had minority enrollments of less than 10 percent. Only a handful of black pupils would attend the other schools (except Robinson, which already had a minority enrollment of nearly 29 percent).

Until 1974-75 the district transported only those pupils (about 50) who lived more than 3-1/2 miles from school. Under the plan, the district agreed to bus nearly 2,300 students who lived at distances from their new schools that the board agreed were too long to walk. In a district where most pupils were driven to and from school by parents, this offer of transportation was viewed as an inducement.

While the closings were expected to reduce costs and curtail isolation, secondary schools were to be realigned to make better use of existing facilities. The plan proposed that Nipher Junior High School temporarily serve only grades six and seven and North Junior High grades eight and nine. Both schools would later be converted to middle schools (grades 6-8) and the high school would absorb grades 9-12. This arrangement would reduce overcrowding while creating the middle school arrangement favored by the administration. Curriculum revisions would be implemented, and innovative instructional techniques, such as team teaching, would be adopted for the middle schools, although some traditional instruction would continue.[20]

One school offering an alternative to the traditional primary education had been established in 1971. This was to be retained, provided that at least 150 students enrolled, that it would meet racial guidelines, and that it proved effective as an educational laboratory. A similar program for students in the eighth and ninth grades directed at truants and underachievers was also to be maintained under the plan and financed by the State.

Additional savings were to be achieved by reduction in staffing. At the same time, teachers would be reassigned to achieve greater ethnic balance. While teachers were to be given their choice of assignments, care would be taken to ensure as much of an ethnic mixture as possible. As a result of staff reductions, the proportion of the elementary school teaching staff that was nonwhite would increase from 10 to 12 percent. At the high school level the proportion would remain 7.5 percent; 25.4 percent of the teachers would be transferred to other schools.

The plan would save $793,226 in expenses, but about half that sum would be absorbed by additional costs of the new plan. Of the added cost, $136,000 would represent permanent expenses, the rest being devoted to nonrecurring expenditures. The overall reduction would eliminate the serious financial drain. Without these economies the

deficit would have increased from $286,509 in 1974-75 to $382,000 in 1975-76.

Implementing the Plan

Prior to implementation of the plan in the 1975-76 school year, Superintendent Waier and two assistant superintendents, Dr. James Fox and Dr. Gerald W. Ellis, organized an effective strategy to gain support for the proposed desegregation plan. Twenty-seven factsheets were distributed outlining the reasons for the changes. These were discussed by the administrative staff at more than 350 "coffees" in the district as well as at 3 large community meetings. These offers allowed the community to give its opinion of the proposals and provided the opposition with the chance to express its concerns before rather than after the presentation of a formal plan. Many minor changes were in fact made in the plan as a consequence of the public participation. Some minority persons, however, believe that the all-black Turner School was selected for closing in response to pressure from white parents.

Interviews[21] conducted by Commission staff in January 1976 produced evidence that teachers were supportive of the whole program, although they were sometimes skeptical. The teachers' union, however, took no position on the plan or its elements.

Politicians, media, and business leaders were generally neutral about the plan. Many were involved in the desegregation process as parents or citizens but not as representatives of professional, civic, or other interests. The mayor of Kirkwood reported that city leaders were not involved but were pleased by the outcome.[22]

Leaders of major civic organizations reportedly favored the changes, but generally remained passive because many of their members opposed it. An exception was the local League of Women Voters.

The media reportedly supported Kirkwood's desegregation efforts. One interviewee commented that the media assisted the desegregation effort by benign neglect. Conflicts that might have been exaggerated or distorted by media treatment therefore remained manageable. The principal newspapers, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and St. Louis Globe-Democrat, could hardly be expected to give much coverage to the daily activities of a small suburban school district.

Public Reaction

Doubts about the plan were widespread in Kirkwood, particularly among those affected by the school closings. Neither whites nor blacks were pleased by the closings. White parents at Des Peres School and black parents at Turner were particularly outspoken. The minority community felt that it was assuming an additional burden because its own school was closed and all its children would have to ride the bus. It protested that, aside from the unequal burden, busing presented particular problems for them since unavoidable tardiness would mean the loss of a day's schooling for their children, while white children would lose only a few hours under similar circumstances. Blacks also perceived Turner School as a vital part of the community. They felt that white students might have been bused into Turner to preserve the school. White parents perceived Turner as a good school but located in a neighborhood they believed so unsavory that effective education would be impossible.[23]

The reorganization did produce some difficulties, which was not surprising given the extent of the changes. Some teachers were reportedly unable to adjust to the new teaching methods and new students. The dislocation of teachers from their familiar surroundings accentuated their difficulties. This was particularly a problem for teachers whose performance had been only marginal prior to the changes.

Many teachers had little or no experience with educationally and economically disadvantaged children or with minority group children. While in the lower primary school grades this was not quite so much of a problem, at the upper primary and middle school grades real adjustments were required. Although the district hired Dr. Gerald Smith, a human relations specialist, to provide inservice assistance (among his other tasks), his work accompanied desegregation rather than preceded it.

The district's desegregation specialist met regularly with key communicators in the R-7 minority community, set up liaison functions between school and minority community, and facilitated a communications improvement in the minority community via the development of a progressive telephoning system among minority parents. Input into the district's leadership forums was provided by the desegregation

specialist, and such groups as the central office, elementary administrators, and secondary administrators.

The desegregation specialist worked to improve the facility to receive, analyze, investigate, monitor, and solve problem calls from minority and majority parents regarding desegregation. Many meetings were held throughout the community with majority parents with desegregation as the focus. Through the involvement of the desegregation specialist with individual building faculties, communication between the ASC and teachers was vastly improved. Through the desegregation specialist's office, an ombudsman function for parents perplexed by the desegregation process was created.

The program testing of a suspension monitoring system created by the desegregation specialist improved the data on which preventative measures could be based.

Exit interviews with all minority teachers who resigned gave further data for a more reliable R-7 self-evaluation. Creation of a volunteer "Bus Riding Cadre" by the desegregation specialist aided in the prevention and solution of many bus problems.

Teachers were instructed in how to cope with various problems while actually confronting them. While this raised the interest of teachers, it meant that during the transition period tension was inevitable. Black teachers and aides were spread too thin in the system to provide adequate assistance for their inexperienced colleagues.

The district reported that of the 103 teachers who were transferred during implementation of the plan:

> ...the adjustment on the part of most of these has been overwhelmingly satisfactory. We have had only one continuing problem with a teacher who has found her new assignment to be considerably less than she would have it to be.[24]

Three black elementary school teachers retired during the school year. The administration conducted exit interviews to ensure that racial discrimination was not a cause.[25] These individuals were replaced by two other black teachers and one white male elementary school teacher.[26]

Teachers at the elementary schools reported some difficulty with discipline and race relations. These subjects were to be dealt with in staff development programs during 1976-77.[27]

Inservice training provided by the Midwest Center for Equal Education Opportunity (MCEEO), the regional technical assistance center, focused largely on problems involving new teaching methods rather than on desegregation. ESAA Title VII funds totaling $200,000 were used.[28] On August 11-15, 1975, MCEEO conducted a workshop on team teaching, development of multiethnic interdisciplinary units, and reduction in sex discrimination. Eighteen teachers attended. Participants and consultants were satisfied with the results. Four more workshops conducted between September 25, 1975, and February 9, 1976, were only partially successful, according to MCEEO evaluations.[29]

A series of workshops was also held throughout the 1975-76 year, involving 160 teachers and central office staff, directed by Dr. Smith and experts from Baltimore, Maryland, public schools and Action Against Apathy, Inc. of Clayton, Missouri.[30]

In preparation for the second year of desegregation, inservice training focused on development of materials that might be used by teachers for problem solving and inclass activities. Funded under a Title VII ESAA grant, the workshops were conducted for 2 days in May and 2 weeks in June 1976. Directed by Dr. Smith, staff included both inhouse personnel and experts from the Leadership Development Laboratory of Baltimore. Webster College gave the teachers involved course credit for attending the workshop. Some 43 language arts, social studies, and resource teachers, as well as counselors, participated on a voluntary basis.[31]

In the 1976 summer workshop a manual for teachers, Integration Activity File, was developed by teachers and administrators. It provided a range of activity ideas to resolve classroom tensions.[32]

Some principals also evidently had problems dealing effectively with desegregated enrollments. For 1976-77, the administration planned to upgrade the principals' race relations skills.[33]

The greatest administrative problem was maintaining effective communication with the community during and after the changeover. During the planning process the community had been saturated with information.

In an effort to improve home-school communication and maintain community participation in school affairs, principals were instructed to issue newsletters.[34] For 1976-77 the newsletters were to continue and the frequency of distribution was to be increased.[35]

IV. DESEGREGATION IN RETROSPECT

Despite some complaints, there was general satisfaction with the desegregation plan. Everyone was relieved that the plan was implemented as smoothly as it was with so little conflict. Community leaders reported significantly greater satisfaction with the plan after implementation than they had felt before. By and large, parents were satisfied because their fears for their children had proved unjustified. Most parents appeared satisfied with the busing arrangements. Most rides were relatively short (12-15 minutes). For parents this represented a new service. Many found it more convenient, but some complained. General community acceptance of desegregation was apparent in the unqualified support given the plan by all candidates in the March 1976 school board elections.[36]

Students also reported general satisfaction with desegregation. Some minority students felt uncomfortable attending a majority white rather than black school, and there was some interracial strife at the middle school level, but student adjustment was reported to be generally smooth.

Several racial incidents were reported on a bus ride to Robinson School, a single fight at Tillman, and general fighting and abusive language at Keysor, but the district believed that these disturbances were "absolutely minimal."[37]

At the high school level, which had been desegregated prior to the reorganization, a committee of 12 students was set up to help deal with racial problems.[38] For the 1976-77 year, efforts were to be made to limit the rate of suspensions at the high school and to ensure that minority students were not discriminated against in disciplinary practices.[39]

V. FINDINGS

On September 21, 1975, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that the desegregation plan was working effectively, despite various kinks. It hoped that this would continue once the "honeymoon" was over.

In retrospect, it is clear that circumstances conspired to permit Kirkwood R-7 School District's desegregation to begin auspiciously. Desegregation was a legal necessity, as OCR had made clear. The arrival of a new superintendent provided a positive impetus for change. Fiscal necessity compelled adjustment of attendance boundaries. School reorganization had become a priority to the administration and teaching professionals. The minority proportion of the population was small. The community was involved but few elements ever took firm positions and intense community opposition did not develop.

Although the changes have proceeded without apparent opposition or difficulty, there is, to be sure, some continuing antagonism. The administration is aware of this, and is making plans to cope with it.

Numerically, desegregation has succeeded. Whether it will succeed as an educational proposition remains to be seen. Much will depend upon the support the administration obtains from the school board, the community, and the teaching staff.

The success of desegregation in Kirkwood may be attributed in large measures to effective planning by the administration and a well-orchestrated public relations campaign that involved the community without surrendering ultimate decisionmaking powers of the school authorities.

The principal obstacle to continued success would be the loss of school board and/or community support. The new school board appears as supportive as the old one. The

administration hopes to maintain a dialogue with parents and community members who, as the situation settles down, may become less involved.

The administration must continue to encourage faculty and staff support for its reforms and to prevent inschool discrimination. The district is working hard to overcome or avoid such problems and ensure that Kirkwood schools are providing quality desegregated education of which the entire community can be proud.

NOTES

1. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population.

2. Theresa Harvey, Meacham Park community leader, telephone interview, Sept. 23, 1976.

3. Dr. Edward E. Fields, interim superintendent of schools, Kansas City, Mo., interview in Kansas City, Sept. 22, 1976 (hereafter cited as Fields interview).

4. Kirkwood School District, A Reorganization Plan for the Kirkwood School District R-7 (January 1975), sec. 3 (hereafter cited as Plan).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Fields interview.

8. Plan.

9. Data supplied by Kirkwood School District. See also, W.A. Shannon, former superintendent of Kirkwood School District, letter to Peter Holmes, Director, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, May 21, 1973 (hereafter cited as Shannon letter).

10. Jerold Ward, chief, education section, OCR, letter to John Sheldrup, Acting Director, Region VII, Aug. 10, 1972.

11. Plan, sec. 3, p. 5. See also, Caroline French, staff attorney, Region VII, DHEW, letter to Taylor August, Director, Region VII, OCR, July 8, 1974.

12. Ibid.

13. Shannon letter.

14. Kirkwood School District, Reorganization Study Information Sheets, no. 3, (Aug. 8, 1974) (hereafter cited as Information Sheets).

15. Ibid., no. 2 (Aug. 8, 1974).

16. Plan, sec. 3, p. 5.

17. Ibid.

18. Taylor August, Director, Region VII, OCR, letter to Dr. Raymond Waier, superintendent of schools, Kirkwood School District, Apr. 11, 1975.

19. Information Sheets, no. 26 (Jan. 10, 1975), p. 2.

20. Plan, sec. 4.

21. Commission staff interviewed superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, teachers, students, school board members, and community members.

22. Phillip Hallof, mayor of Kirkwood, telephone interview, Sept. 16, 1976.

23. St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Feb. 14, 1974.

24. Kirkwood School District, Significant Improvement...Changes...Tasks...Activities Accomplished in 1975-76 (n.d.), par. 34 (hereafter cited as 1975-76 Accomplishments).

25. Ibid. par. 101.

26. Ibid., par. 31.

27. Kirkwood School District, Significant Improvement...Changes...Tasks...Activities Planned for 1976-77 (n.d.), par. 13 (hereafter cited as 1976-77 Plans).

28. 1975-76 Accomplishments, pars. 3, 98.

29. Midwest Center for Equal Education Opportunity, Final Reports (Sept. 25, 1975; Oct. 19, 1975; Nov. 18 and 19, 1975; Jan. 31, 1976; Feb. 9, 1976).

30. Data supplied by Kirkwood School District.

31. Ibid.

32. Kirkwood School District, Integration Activity File: An Interpersonal Focus, developed from the 1975-76 workshop series with teachers led by Dr. Smith.

33. 1976-77 Plans, par. 17.

34. 1975-76 Accomplishments, par. 30.

35. 1976-77 Plans, par. 16.

36. Kirkwood Area League of Women Voters, Election Special, March 1976.

37. 1975-76 Accomplishments, par. 29.

38. Ibid., par. 63.

39. 1976-77 Plans, par. 69.

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