SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN WILLIAMSBURG COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

A STAFF REPORT OF
THE UNITED STATES
COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

June 1977

U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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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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I. INTRODUCTION

Williamsburg County, South Carolina, is located near the Atlantic Ocean, approximately 50 miles to the southeast of Columbia, the State capital. Much of the land within this rural region of the State is devoted to farming. Typically, the residents of the county are natives of the area. Despite race or economic status, the people "know" each other in the way that is commonplace to generations of rural Americans. According to the 1970 census, the county population totaled 34,243, of whom 61 percent (20,867) were black.

All of Williamsburg County comprises a single school district. In 1975 the student population was 9,075; 7,227 (80 percent) were black. Of the 467 members of the faculty, 292 (63 percent) were black. The district has 7 high schools, 14 elementary and middle schools, 1 handicap center, and 1 vocational center.[1]

II. EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY BEGINS

Prior to desegregation in 1970 and 1971, there had been minimal effort directed toward the reduction of racial isolation in the Williamsburg County schools. Black students first enrolled in all-white schools in 1965, after the school system began operating on a "freedom of choice" basis. As a result, although the district's student enrollment in 1968 was 72 percent black, the most desegregated schools were Kingstree Elementary (12.9 percent black), Kingstree High (10.8 percent black), and Hemingway (12.5 percent black). There were four schools minimally desegregated, seven all-black schools, and one all-white school. Table 1 shows school populations in the county, as reported for September 30, 1968, to the Office of Civil Rights, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

In 1970 HEW provided the impetus toward more complete school desegregation. Following negotiations between local school administrators and HEW officials, additional desegregation took place with the pairing of nine schools, affecting approximately 6,000 students. In 1971 HEW required the county to take further action: four remaining county schools with grades K-12 were paired, involving approximately 2,500 students.

Consequently, without closing any schools, most were substantially desegregated. Only those schools in rural areas, largely or solely inhabited by blacks, have undergone little or no desegregation. Tables 2 and 3 reflect school enrollment by race as of October 11, 1974, and January 25, 1977, respectively.

Revamping Structure and Curriculum

Changes did take place in the structure of elementary education at the time of desegregation. With increased Federal funds available for teacher training and program innovation, school officials determined that this period of

adjustment to desegregation would be the most opportune time to introduce a new teaching system, a sequential rating method geared to individual achievement. With this sequential rating method, known as the Continuous Progress Program, students progressed at their own level of ability in each subject area. This system was begun in grades K-3 in 1970 and has since been implemented in grades 4-6. The program was widely praised by Williamsburg's parents and school officials for enhancing academic achievement while minimizing the potential difficulties encountered as students with varying educational backgrounds were combined.

On the junior and senior high school levels, black studies received attention. Teaching units and entire courses in black history and literature were added to the curriculum.

Extensive Federal aid has been and is being used in Williamsburg County to support these innovations. The $8 million operating budget is 40 percent Federal, 50 percent State, and 10 percent local monies.

Transporting Students

No increase in the number of students bused or in the length of time spent riding the bus was reported by school administrators. Based on their figures, 85 percent of the district's students were bused before desegregation, and the same percentage after. In this rural county, covering 935 square miles, such extensive busing is inevitable.

There has been a modest increase in the mileage covered (10 percent), but fewer buses were used in 1976 (129) than in 1970 (131). No student has more than a 45-minute ride one way.

Faculty Transfers

Teachers were advised that desegregation would require the transfer of faculty. Volunteers were recruited before teachers were compelled to transfer. Approximately 50 percent of Williamsburg's faculty was transferred as a result of desegregation.

Prior to desegregation (1969), the faculty of 554 included 340 (61 percent) blacks; in fall 1970 the faculty numbered 487, including 316 (65 percent) black teachers.

TABLE 1

Williamsburg County Public Schools
Enrollment By Race
September 30, 1968

SCHOOLS (GRADES)	WHITE	BLACK	TOTAL
Kingstree (8-12)	582	63	645
Kingstree (1-7)	819	106	925
Tomlinson (7-12)	-	862	862
Anderson (K-6)	-	1,060	1,060
St. Mark (K-12)	-	893	893
Lane Consolidated (K-8)	-	471	471
Hemingway (K-12)	864	108	972
Chavis (K-12)	-	945	945
Williamsburg (1-12)	494	8	502
Blakely (K-12)	2	846	848
Hebron (1-12)	271	-	271
Cades (K-12)	-	886	886
Greeleyville (1-12)	209	8	217
Williamsburg County Trng (K-12)	-	1,045	1,045
Battery Park (K-12)	3	1,032	1,035
TOTALS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT	3,244	8,333	11,577

SOURCE: Williamsburg County Superintendent's Office.

TABLE 2

Williamsburg County Public Schools
Enrollment By Race
October 11, 1974

SCHOOLS (GRADES)	WHITE	BLACK	TOTAL
Hemingway High (9-12)	232	215	447
Kingstree High (10-12)	116	475	591
Cades-Hebron High (9-12)	41	193	234
Williamsburg High (9-12)	106	216	322
St. Mark High (7-12)	-	451	451
Battery Park High (7-12)	3	458	461
Murray High (7-12)	37	596	633
Williamsburg Handicap Ctr.	2	7	9
Williamsburg Primary (K-2)	51	150	201
Blakely Middle (3-8)	141	387	528
Anderson Primary (K-3)	115	650	765
Kingstree Elem. (4-7)	179	632	811
Kingstree Jr. High (8-9)	90	343	433
Hemingway Primary (K-3)	215	191	406
Hemingway Middle (4-8)	285	285	570
Battery Park Elem. (K-6)	-	490	490
Cades-Hebron Primary (K-4)	52	248	300
Cades-Hebron Middle (5-8)	81	162	243
Greenville Primary (K-3)	7	211	218
Lane Consolidated (K-8)	9	379	388
St. Mark Elem. (K-6)	1	488	489
Murray Elem. (4-6)	17	185	202
TOTAL FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT	1,780	7,412	9,192

SOURCE: Williamsburg County Superintendent's Office.

TABLE 3

Williamsburg County Public Schools
Enrollment By Race
January 25, 1977

SCHOOLS (GRADES)	WHITE	BLACK	TOTAL
Hemingway High (9-12)	254	208	462
Kingstree High (10-12)	135	471	606
Cades-Hebron High (9-12)	53	169	222
Williamsburg High (9-12)	109	217	326
St. Mark High (7-12)	-	378	378
Battery Park High (7-12)	-	400	400
Murray High (7-12)	25	520	545
Williamsburg Handicap Ctr.	4	28	32
Williamsburg Primary (K-2)	50	165	215
Blakely Middle (3-8)	115	397	512
Anderson Primary (K-3)	139	647	786
Kingstree Elem. (4-7)	206	685	891
Kingstree Jr. High (8-9)	108	342	450
Hemingway Primary (K-3)	196	191	387
Hemingway Middle (4-8)	283	313	596
Battery Park Elem. (K-6)	-	514	514
Cades-Hebron Primary (K-4)	58	216	274
Cades-Hebron Middle (5-8)	68	176	244
Greeleyville Primary (K-3)	8	229	237
Lane Consolidated (K-8)	10	345	355
St. Mark Elem. (K-6)	-	479	479
Murray Elem. (4-6)	11	196	207
Hemingway Area Voc. Center	40	110	150
TOTAL FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT	1,872	7,396	9,268

SOURCE: Williamsburg County Superintendent's Office.

Between 1968 and 1970 the school system lost 20 percent of its white teachers (43) and 7 percent (24) black teachers.

Preparing Faculty and Students for Change

Faculty received biracial-bicultural training after the opening of school in 1970. Federal money financed the special workshops, which teachers referred to as sensitivity sessions. Of the teachers and counselors surveyed, a slim majority believed that they received sufficient training to prepare them for desegregation.

There were no such formal arrangements for the students. Many teachers, counselors, and school officials did, however, meet with groups of students to discuss implementation of the plan. At some schools, students elected co-officers in student affairs, one black and one white.

Improved Student Behavior

Teachers and counselors reported no major discipline problems either before desegregation or during the first 2 years thereafter. Statistics from a study by the Southern Regional Council (SRC) showed a dramatic decline in expulsions: 9 in 1974 compared to 20 in 1970.[2] Blacks and whites are suspended in proportion to their numbers in the school population.

Teachers did cite tardiness as a problem, but attendance was generally good. Once again, data from SRC is impressive: 71 high school dropouts in 1974 compared to 129 in 1970.[3]

Educational Quality

Counselors, principals, school administrators, and board members agreed, almost unanimously, that the quality of education has improved since desegregation. In contrast, students, teachers, and representatives of the community are divided in their opinions. White high school students thought quality had decreased; blacks thought it had increased. At least one teacher felt blacks were getting a better education because of desegregation but that white students were not getting as good an education as they had previously. White teachers were almost evenly divided on the question of whether or not the quality of education had

improved whereas their black colleagues were somewhat more positive in their evaluations of educational quality since desegregation. Most community representatives felt that the quality of education remained stable or improved slightly. Both those who thought it had decreased and those who thought it had increased cited test scores as evidence.

A principal reported that Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were lower, but that more students were now taking the tests, which naturally would lower the scores. An increase in students taking the test may be indicative of increased motivation and scholastic ambition.

A statewide battery of tests showed that Williamsburg's seventh graders who had been in the Continuous Progress program performed at a median grade level of 6.2 in the fall of 1975. The same tests, given in 1971 to seventh graders who had not been in the program, produced a median grade level of 4.0.[4]

Professors of the University of Alabama who are responsible for evaluating the Continuous Progress program have reported that the Williamsburg School District has a record of educational improvement unequaled by any district in the country.[5]

Teacher Performance Improved

Both students and teachers acknowledged that teacher performance had improved after desegregation. Supplementary materials made available through grants under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act undoubtedly enhanced faculty effectiveness. But perhaps more significant was the personal efforts of these professionals to learn about another race, to put students at ease while challenging them in their new environment, and to ensure impartiality in their own classrooms. One source indicated that the more volatile teachers and students left the public school system. The vast majority of those who stayed set aside the traditions of segregation and showed concern for individuals in the schools and the educational process itself.

III. THE ENVIRONMENT FOR TRANSITION: LOCAL OPINIONS AND ACTIONS

School Administrators: Strong and Positive

Superintendent R. C. Fennell and other school administrators were reported to be the individuals who provided the vital leadership which facilitated desegregation. The superintendent was cited again and again as the fulcrum of positive attitudes and action. Because HEW was the impetus for desegregation in Williamsburg, the responsibility to respond rested with the district's chief administrator, who did so in a positive, productive way.

Principals and other district officials, both black and white, said they were favorable to school desegregation prior to its occurring in the district. These administrators actively expressed that supportive position by meeting with students, parents, and teachers and participating in training sessions for their faculty. Professionally and publicly they complied with desegregation as ordered by the Federal Government.

School administrators registered even more positive attitudes towards desegregation after it had occurred than before. They reported, as did students and faculty, that better relations between whites and blacks were promoted in school and in the community because of desegregation. As with other groups, the administrators acknowledged a split on the issue among some whites. They felt, however, that new and important opportunities for growth had been created.

Acquiescence of the School Board

Under the leadership of Superintendent Fennell, the county school board held meetings with citizens, parents, teachers, and students. The board was helpful in obtaining additional Federal and State monies for new programs and special training sessions. The school board, however, did not explicitly request the assistance of business,

religious, political, or civil rights leaders in promoting desegregation. A black board member who fully endorsed desegregation did contact community leaders to ask for such assistance. Of nine board members, six were reportedly "unopposed," and three were "opposed to the desegregation plan."

Parental Attitudes

In general the attitudes of parents prior to desegregation varied according to the color of their skin. Blacks indicated that they favored desegregation and whites exhibited a tendency to hedge on the issue, often stating that they were neither for nor against desegregation. This laissez faire attitude of whites was one of the key factors in Williamsburg's orderly desegregation. That, coupled with a prodigious respect for the law, prompted white parents to "go peacefully" and require their children to do likewise.

The few whites who were bitterly opposed to desegregation protested in peaceful ways. A petition was carried to State school authorities, for example. When the inevitable was at hand, the more affluent of this group took their children out of public school and, citing concern for quality education, enrolled them in the several newly established private schools. Some local elected officials, a local school board member, and even the president of the National Association of School Board Members have children in these all-white private schools.

Black parents of all social and economic levels in the community were supportive of the plan. Many expressed concern over facing the unknown but agreed that school desegregation would better prepare young blacks for success in today's society. Those white parents who did support the plan shared similar apprehensions, but believed it best for blacks and whites to learn to get along when young so all could lead more peaceful and productive lives after their school years.

Student Opinions

Interviews with high school seniors disclosed that students' feelings toward desegregation were quite mixed. These students, who were eighth graders when desegregation took place, were fearful of a new school environment. Whites were concerned about academic quality, and blacks

were apprehensive about the new competition they would face. Having the identity of their individual schools lost in the process of desegregation was not appealing to either group. None of the students assumed an active role in promoting desegregation.

Students agreed that school desegregation had promoted better relations between black and white students and the community in general. They felt that it was advantageous to attend a racially mixed school in which they could learn to get along with persons of another race and thus be able to get along better in a racially mixed country.

Most of the students thought the extracurricular activities were well-mixed racially. Several, however, noted that white students were seldom elected to office. Whites are minority in number at all Williamsburg high schools.

Students' general feelings about desegregation prior to implementation ranged from cautiously neutral to very negative. Attitudes after implementation shifted to the other end of the scale: indifferent to positive.

Positive Teacher Attitudes

Williamsburg faculty members interviewed by the Commission indicated that the attitude of teachers toward desegregation was generally good. Whites were somewhat less positive than blacks. Concerns were expressed about dealing with parents, students, and teachers of the opposite race. Teachers met with each other to discuss desegregation, and many met with parents and students to publicly express their views. Though some white teachers who were most opposed to desegregation did leave the school system, the majority stayed with the public schools and kept their own children enrolled.

The faculty generally had neutral or positive feelings before desegregation. After desegregation, faculty opinions about it were more positive. The Williamsburg County Education Association (there is no teachers' union in Williamsburg), which was primarily a white group prior to desegregation, did encourage members to assist the desegregation process whenever possible in the conduct of their classrooms.

Community Leaders

Leadership from other sources did little or nothing to actively support desegregation of the public schools. Local politicians publicly reflected the position of their constituencies: opposed but willing to obey the law, or supportive but not enthusiastic. Religious leaders did little more than call for peaceful acquiescence by their congregations.

The business community did not become involved in the schools' dilemma. Businesses in the county had been voluntarily and peacefully desegregated years earlier.

The local newspaper, the Kingstree News, had no editorial policy on the subject at the time of desegregation. It did publish the content of the plan. Most sources remember the local media as neither a help nor a hindrance to school desegregation.

No group within the community directly attempted to obstruct implementation of the plan. Indirectly, one could say that those whites who organized or supported the segregationist schools did obstruct the process by making total desegregation of school-age children impossible.

Varied sources named the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as the community group most active in facilitating desegregation. Through correspondence and discussions with both parents and students, the NAACP sought to make them comfortable with the new school environments and encouraged black students to be receptive to their new white teachers.

IV. WILLIAMSBURG COUNTY'S SUCCESS: THE GLORY AND THE CHALLENGE

Success Unquestionable

Desegregation in Williamsburg County has been very successful. The system complied with HEW guidelines; litigation was not necessary. Although tension did exist initially and still does to a lesser degree within the high schools and the community, desegregation has been peaceful and the schools have functioned without interruption. Many parents, students, and teachers, especially those associated with grades K-6, have developed positive feelings about school desegregation.

The outlook for effective desegregated education in Williamsburg County is bright. Within 4 years the first group of students who participated in the desegregated elementary schools' Continuous Progress program will graduate from high school. Students who grew up in the old traditional school setting will have left the system. For those older students the adjustments necessitated during their public school careers have been difficult; their academic and social lives were complicated as remedies for generations of discrimination were implemented. They coped with the challenges relatively well. Their younger brothers and sisters, however, are already better equipped to learn, both academically and socially, in the racially mixed school system.

Current testing indicates that the preschool ability level of students is improving; both the gap between blacks and whites and that between children from lower and upper economic families are narrowing. There is sufficient reason to believe that the kindergarten program of the public schools will reinforce these trends. These facts, plus the continuing opportunity for blacks and whites to become acquainted, should result in true equal educational opportunity for all students.

With disparity in academic achievement lessened and persons of both races working together, relations between the races should continue to improve. Those who have positive experiences with the schools will carry those feelings into the community.

Challenges to Face

The divisions that exist between persons associated with the public schools and those associated with the private schools will likely remain. Public school supporters have made it clear that they would welcome the private school advocates back into the system "as if they had never been away."

The possibility that the private schools will continue to exist does not, however, pose any threat to the continued growth and prosperity of the public school system. Families with children in the private schools make up only about one-sixth of more than 7,500 families in the county. If the majority of Williamsburg County's families with children in public schools produced leadership in proportion to their numbers, and if those leaders then exerted influence in support of the public schools, the entire community would benefit. That degree of support for the public schools has not been apparent in the past.

V. CONCLUSION

The Keys to Success

The leadership of the school superintendent, the positive attitudes of other school officials and faculty, and the citizens' abiding respect for the laws of the United States were the primary keys to peaceful and successful school desegregation in Williamsburg County.

School Superintendent Fennell exhibited outstanding leadership in support of school desegregation. Not only did he influence other school officials and the faculty, he also took full advantage of Federal monies available for special training programs and for the development of new teaching techniques. His courage to implement the Continuous Progress program and his ability to recruit capable staff to manage the program smoothed the desegregation process and strengthened the educational program in the county.

In general, the attitudes of the faculty, school district personnel, and school board members were positive. Following the lead of the superintendent, their first concern was the education of young people. Not all, of course, favored those changes mandated by the HEW-approved plan or introduced by the superintendent. However, acquiescence, rather than rebellion, was their posture.

The average citizen of Williamsburg County must be credited with a major contribution to successful school desegregation also. A pervasive respect for the law compelled citizens to peacefully accept the desegregation of their schools. Those parents with sufficient financial resources who were most opposed to desegregation quietly took their children from the public schools and enrolled them in private schools. Others quietly conformed with the new plans for pupil assignments.

Liabilities Overcome

The lack of active support for school desegregation from the media, religious, political, business, and other community leaders was a definite liability which was not as detrimental to the process as it might have been. Also, although several members of the school board expressed opposition to desegregation at board meetings, they maintained a quiet public posture. These individuals did little to either ease the tensions or escalate the problems inherent in such extensive social change. They were neutral for the most part and the vacuum created was filled with the positive influences that were present in the school district.

The creation and growth of private, segregated academies may also be viewed as a liability that had the potential to disrupt peaceful public school desegregation. From 1968 until 1974 the public school system lost 1,468 of its 3,248 white students (45.2 percent). The majority of these students left the system prior to actual desegregation in 1970 and 1971. Despite the bad feeling that developed within the white community between supporters of private and public schools, the county was able to focus on the positive aspects of its public school system.

Toward the Future

Current information from Williamsburg County indicates that both teachers and students are returning to the public school system. Some sources predict that a number of the private schools, beset with financial and accreditation problems, will soon close.

An increase in parental involvement in the educational process is currently evident in Williamsburg County. Parents have recently organized to raise money for specific programs in several public schools and to demand better responsiveness from and representation on the county school board.

Commission interviews with Williamsburg County residents disclosed that much of the good news about the school system was not reaching the public, especially those citizens who did not have direct contact with the schools. As communications between the school system and the public are improved, the true image of Williamsburg County's public

schools--their progress as well as their problems--will emerge. Such a development will enhance support and generate more enthusiasm for the public school system.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise credited, information in this report is derived from interviews conducted by the staff and members of the South Carolina Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights during January 1976 in Williamsburg County, South Carolina.

2. John Egerton, School Desegregation: A Report Card from the South (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, April 1976), p. 23.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 22.

5. Ibid.

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