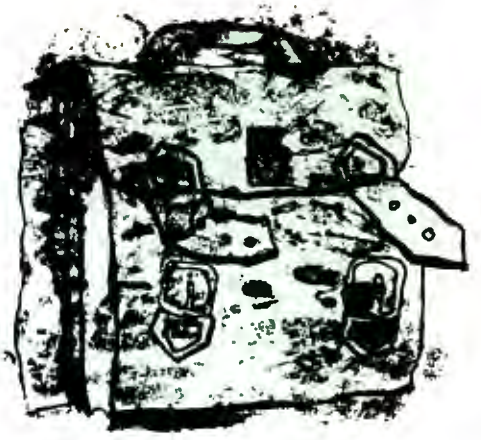

SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN GREENVILLE, MISSISSIPPI

A STAFF REPORT OF
THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION
ON CIVIL RIGHTS

August 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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The field investigation and writing of this report was primarily the staff assignment of Miriam Grayboff. Mark Schneider provided legal review.

The project was undertaken under the overall supervision of Bobby D. Doctor, Director, Southern Regional Office.

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At the appointment of the Staff Director of the Commission, all activities that contributed to this report were under the general supervision and coordination of William T. White, Jr., Assistant Staff Director, Office of National Civil Rights Issues.

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.

I. BACKGROUND

In many ways Greenville, Mississippi, is an atypical Southern city. Its particular locale and function as a river port, to and from which people have traveled freely for commerce and pleasure for generations, have given this proud and friendly community a quality of openness to new ideas and cultures.

Greenville's 1970 population of 39,648 (53 percent of whom are minorities) qualifies it as a "city" by U.S. Bureau of the Census standards.[1] But its long economic ties to the rich alluvial deposits of the Mississippi River make it very much a part of the rural Delta farmland, which has not been known as a particularly progressive region of the State, politically or socially.

Despite this influence, the Klan never got a real foothold in Greenville, where facilities such as the small airport and railway station had been integrated years before the sit-ins and demonstrations in Jackson, the State capital. All during the civil rights turbulence of the early 1960s Greenville was notable for its absence from the roster of Mississippi communities that had flareups of organized racial violence.

The racial calm and available labor attracted companies from the north to this Mississippi port in cotton country. A decade ago, Alexander Smith Carpets moved its large mill operations from Yonkers, New York, to Greenville. Other industries followed, filling some of the job vacuum left by the mechanization of agriculture.

While in the past wealthy white residents of Greenville were the only ones to venture beyond the Delta's horizon for a liberalizing education, many blacks in recent years have also left for college or work; by choice, many have also come back home to Greenville.

In addition to the black population, the city has a large Creole population and about 400 Chinese Americans

(one-fourth the total number in the State) who contribute to Greenville's image of itself as "cosmopolitan" and different.

II. EFFORTS TO DESEGREGATE

Voluntary Desegregation

Greenville's desegregation of its school system was an extension of what the city had started 15 years before in public facilities and, years before that, on its voter registration rolls.

In 1964, 5 years before ordered to do so by a Federal judge, the Greenville Municipal School District Board of Trustees initiated its own plan for majority-to-minority crossover of students on a "freedom of choice" basis. This voluntary public school desegregation, the first such effort in Mississippi, brought an angry response from the governor, Paul T. Johnson, who wanted all the school districts in the State to join together to resist the courts' mandates.

The school board also initiated a voluntary teacher transfer program that met with considerably more success than the student program. Mutual switches could be and were arranged among the teachers themselves, and administrative teacher transfers supplemented the rolls of volunteers.

School board members, some of whom are very successful agribusinessmen, made no pretensions of desire for liberal social change in their attempts to make in Greenville a legal unitary school system. Rather, the very pragmatic reason they voiced, publicly and privately, was that the city could not afford not to comply with the law of the land. Besides, large grants of money were to be available from the Federal Government under the Emergency School Assistance Program to ease the difficulties of desegregation.

"We could not afford the luxury of segregation," says J. Barthelle Joseph, Jr., who was then a member of the school board and is now its chairman. The Greenville board had no wish to forfeit U.S. Office of Education funds by retaining its dual school system. (In the fall of 1968, the Office for Civil Rights, Department of Health, Education,

and Welfare, was beginning to enforce Federal guidelines in the South in earnest.)

By 1968, just prior to the court order, the previously all-white high school had a black student representation of 15 percent. No whites, however, had exercised their freedom to choose the all-black Coleman High School or any of the all-black elementary schools. Another drawback to the Greenville voluntary choice program was that the degree of desegregation was dependent on availability of space in the schools requested.

Court-ordered Plan

In the eyes of the black community and the fair-minded, practical school board, the Greenville "freedom of choice" approach proved too slow and put too much of the burden on minority students. "It would have worked eventually," Dr. W.B. Thompson, superintendent during desegregation, said, "but would have taken about 30 years."

Pressure from the minority community for both deliberation and speed, expressed through lawsuits filed in Federal court in the mid-1960s, was the impetus for the plan now in operation. Some members of the school board now say that they welcomed the court orders which allowed them to develop a total plan for desegregation. Their first efforts in responding to the court, however, satisfied neither the black community nor the whites, a sizeable percentage of whom pulled their children out of the public schools and enrolled them in new private academies in anticipation of what the court might order.

However, almost everyone interviewed during the case study agrees that leadership for implementation came from the students themselves. Most white students who had been born in Greenville chose to stay in the public schools, according to one plantation owner. He maintains that newcomers from out-of-state were the ones who were afraid they would lose status with their neighbors if they allowed their children to be among the "minority" in what was bound to be a predominately black district.

Even if no whites had left the public schools during the transition from dual to unitary, blacks would still have constituted the largest proportion of students--blacks make up more than half of Greenville's population. In the fall of 1975 the public school student enrollment consisted of

7,070 blacks, 20 Asian Americans, and 2,958 "all others" for a total of 10,048. Whites composed a minority of about 30 percent. In the fall of 1968, prior to the court-ordered desegregation plan, the total public school population was 12,345--6,669 blacks, 66 Asian Americans, 3 students with Spanish surnames and 5,606 listed as "all others." At that time the white students constituted a minority of 44 percent.

Black parents had no place to run to with their children. They formed an ad hoc committee, which eventually included whites as well, to thrash through the school administration's plan until it was something that they and their children could live with. This collaboration took place, for the most part, in a series of closed meetings with the board and plaintiffs in the suit.

Today, desegregation of the Greenville public schools is very nearly total. The district has used a combination of virtually all the remedies Federal courts across the country have suggested: zoning, pairing, assignment of students, changes in curriculum, and transportation. Not one school is left with an all-black student body, as is the case in many southern districts under court order.

III. THE DESEGREGATION PLAN

Desegregation: One Change Among Many

Desegregation was accomplished through a somewhat radical but sensible restructuring of the educational system. The essential modification made in the district schools was to change the grade range and to institute team teaching for first-graders and up. Some schools became early elementary and others upper elementary. All students from a particular zone (realigned to assure white and minority representation) are thus brought together on the basis of age. Racial proportions in each school roughly approximate the proportions in the overall school population at that age level. The ratios, however, are outgrowths of the design, not the design itself.

At present Greenville has 11 elementary schools (3 for grades 1-3; 3 for grades 4-6; 4 for grades 1-6; and 1 for the trainable mentally retarded); 3 junior high schools (grades 7-9), a single 10th grade school (formerly the all-black T.L. Watson High School), and a single Greenville High School (grades 11 and 12). The yearly expenditure per pupil is $757, considerably above the State average.

One feature of the age-level grouping is that children are with their peers. Resources for teaching each particular age group are also consolidated. Age-level grouping also brings children together from low- , middle- and high-income families of different ethnic backgrounds. Greenville thus approximates in its classrooms the democratic microcosms praised by sociologists and educators but rarely achieved in public schools.

Team teaching has been instituted. As teams rotate among classes in patterns similar to those used in high schools each youngster comes in contact with three or four different teachers every day, some black and some white, thus getting exposure to a variety of behavioral "models."

As for the learning benefits, while no comparative tests have been constructed to measure the Greenville youngsters against students in other public school systems that do not have so good a socioeconomic mix, administrators note that in statewide tests Greenville high school students average second among all Mississippi schools, public and private.

Addressing the New Student Mix

The lack of adequate human relations training was cited by several persons interviewed as one of the problems in the desegregation process. One extensive human relations program was conducted for school counselors. Funded through the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), the program ran in the school district over a 2-year period. Counselors who attended the twice-weekly course received $4 to $5 per hour for their participation; attendance was optional.

Some modest changes have been made in the curriculum, such as the inclusion of black history. One inventive modification is designed to meet the needs of some adolescents who are turned off to conventional classrooms: Businessmen were asked to provide work opportunities in commerce and in industrial plants for which students could earn money as well as school credits. This was part of an expanded off-campus vocational education program to combat attendance and dropout problems among both black and white students.

Effect on Staff

In the first stages of transition, teachers remained somewhat neutral. Black teachers and administrators were particularly apprehensive that the desegregation of the district--although it might afford students improved facilities--might mean demotions for them personally. Some left the schools and took government jobs, which were beginning to open up in the area and paid higher salaries. Others took jobs at nearby black colleges, thus preserving their positions of prestige in the community.

The number and proportion of white minority teachers has been virtually the same over the past 7 years. Because of the team teaching technique adopted for elementary age children and the widesweeping administrative teacher transfer program, about three out of every four elementary teachers ended up working in schools other than the ones in

which they taught in 1968. Team teaching has also served effectively as a method of staff desegregation.

As white and minority teachers have left the system, they have been replaced, by court order, with teachers of the same race. Each school staff now reflects the racial ratio of teachers in the system. The school staff composition in fall 1975 was 250 blacks and 284 whites for a total of 534; in 1968 there were 541 on the faculty--250 blacks, 1 Asian American, and 291 whites. While the student population is about 2,000 less now than in 1968, the district has not decreased the teaching staff proportionally.

Although displacement of black teachers, which has occurred in numerous other Southern school districts, has not taken place in Greenville, some black teachers and administrators no longer have the status and prestige they enjoyed within the black school system. Dr. Matthew Page, a Greenville resident and a member of the Mississippi Advisory Committee, said, "Some black teachers and black administrators, namely principals, are having some second thoughts about the desegregation in the Greenville Public School District. There is uneasiness and frustration mainly because of the lack of upward mobility."

While the overall numbers of minority and white personnel in the school district roughly approximate those in the dual system, only one black (out of seven--all men) holds a top level administrative title. Just what his administrative responsibilities are is a matter of some conjecture.

IV. PROMOTING DESEGREGATION: 1970

The School District's Effort

In April 1970, 5 months before the comprehensive plan was to be put into effect, a large scale information effort was launched by the Greenville District Board of Trustees. While the design of the promotion came from the school system, the program itself involved various segments of the community: students, civic groups, media, and administrative personnel. The basic activities scheduled to build up receptivity to the unified district plan were:

- A 1-hour forum-type television program with school personnel explaining the details of the plan. ("We wanted no surprises," said J. Barthelle Joseph, chairman of the school board.)

- A color slide presentation for use by a speaker pool of volunteers who appeared before civic clubs, fraternal organizations, PTAs, and the like.

- Bumper stickers boosting support of the schools, given to the women's committee and students for distribution.

- Principals of junior and senior highs explaining the approved plan to their various student bodies. Student leaders were asked to appear on the platforms with the principals and voice their views on the unification plan.

- Letters to all parents with children in Greenville public schools asking for their cooperation in making the plan work and welcoming questions or personal interviews with those who felt the plan created particular problems affecting their children.

- An information center, which had been in operation since the first desegregation efforts, to provide complete information about the new plan including maps and bus schedules. Ads were run in the newspaper

giving the center's telephone number to call for information.

•Well-publicized "open house" sessions at all schools to get parents to visit the facilities their children were assigned to so they could see for themselves the surroundings and meet the teachers. (Although not mentioned in the proposed list of activities submitted by the school administration, Commission staff were told that additional steps were taken to spruce up the interiors of some formerly black schools.)

•A telephone survey of parents conducted by the women's committee. A questionnaire prepared by the school staff was used in the survey to elicit attitudinal information. Members of the women's committee were instructed to reassure the doubters and ask reasons of those who planned to transfer students to private academies. The survey team was also advised to keep the questioning "low key," not to get argumentative, and to close on a friendly note--whatever the parent response.

Business and Media Contributions

The business community was asked to participate directly in unified public education by providing on-the-job vocational training experience for high school students.

In addition to keeping the public informed on the details of the unified district plan as they developed through the court process, the Delta Democrat Times presented pictorial features on education in Greenville and also ran a series of positive editorials extolling public education in general and Greenville's schools in particular.

Perhaps the most effective elements in the process were the timing and the completeness of the approach. Nothing was left to the last minute, as is often done in response to court-ordered desegregation. Five months were allowed for fully informing the public. There were "no surprises."

V. ATMOSPHERE AND ATTITUDES

The Black Community

While most minority parents supported the plan because they thought it would improve their children's educational opportunities, they did not like the fact that very young children would have to travel farther from home than they had previously. All youngsters, white and black, traveled to schools in their zones on the basis of the grade level, i.e., 1 through 3 or 4 through 6.

Also, many black parents, almost all black students, and many black educators objected to the conversion of the black Coleman High School into a junior high school. Even though the building remains open, several blacks interviewed spoke of the "closing of Coleman High" as the most objectionable element in the current plan--the loss of a school that had reflected and nourished black identity among their teenagers.

Sarah Johnson, a member of the Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights who lives in Greenville and serves on the city council, said, "All symbols of blackness such as class pictures that hung on the walls, plaques, citations, trophies...were removed and/or destroyed." Ms. Johnson had also been a plaintiff in the suit that brought about the court-ordered desegregation plan.

This revisionist approach to desegregation may have been promoted by the school administration so that Coleman School would not be racially identifiable. But to many in the black community, this showed white planners to be insensitive to the significant and cohesive role played by Coleman in the development of ethnic pride among Greenville's blacks.

Varieties of Leadership

A public education campaign was mounted. Not only the school administration and board members, but also the political leaders--the mayor, the chief of police, and members of the city council--made public appeals for cooperation and calm. Greenville business leaders (in several instances they were also school board members) gave their support to the desegregation effort. The consensus of the more than 30 people formally interviewed is that there was and is a spirit of good will in Greenville, in spite of the hostility of some white parents to desegregation. Their hostility never became ugly in an overt way; rather, they chose the genteel route of taking their youngsters out of the public schools and enrolling them in private ones.

Black and white church leaders were asked to appeal to their congregations for cooperation. Reportedly, the most responsive among the white clergy were the Episcopalians, who already had integrated congregations, and the Catholics, who agreed to assist in compliance by not accepting additional students in their parochial schools unless they were of the Catholic faith.

Hodding Carter III, editor and publisher of the Delta Democrat Times, kept the public informed on the details of the plan as it developed through the court and biracial committee interchanges.

The White Community

Most white students reportedly were reluctant to leave the public schools. Consequently, a schism has been created between many parents and their youngsters because of their being transferred to private academies. On the other hand, many white students who remained discovered a newfound cameraderie with their parents. William Percy, Jr., a board member, said, "Desegregation helped bridge the generation, the communication gap in Greenville. Parents and kids had to discuss the situation in which they had a mutual interest and so began talking with one another."

VI. THE LOW COST OF BUSING

Two years before desegregation, 4 percent (500 of 12,500) of Greenville's students were transported by bus to school. The next year the number had diminished to 3.2 percent. It rose slightly to 3.5 percent during the first year of desegregation. To implement the plan that totally restructured the educational system, 1,100 (14.5 percent) out of 10,500 students had to be transported during the second year of desegregation.

Some students who now attend the paired elementary schools do have to travel a mile or 2 farther than they did when they went to schools in their immediate neighborhoods, but the travel time difference is not more than 20 minutes.

The inconvenience of traveling a few extra miles (3 miles maximum to elementary school and, at the most, 5 miles to the 10th grade school) to schools is shared by whites and blacks--except that there are twice as many blacks in the schools and therefore more blacks on the buses. The school board has made an effort to rezone the areas within the district to minimize distances. If there was one murmur of regret that was heard often during the interviews from black as well as white parents, it was over the passing of the "neighborhood school" concept.

Cost of transportation to the district went from 0.6 percent of the budget in 1968 (when 3 percent were traveling via school buses) to 0.5 percent of the 1969 budget, according to the school superintendent. Then, in 1970, to transport 14.8 percent of the students, costs of busing doubled but still amounted only to 1.3 percent of the total school budget. One of the reasons that costs have been contained is that all public school transportation in Greenville works two ways, back and forth between white and black neighborhoods. Thus it is not only equitable--it is cheaper than bringing black students to white schools and sending vehicles back to the barn empty.

Out of a $7,606,336 school budget, $98,878 went for transportation in 1972--contrasted with about $50,000 in 1968 when gasoline and maintenance costs were considerably lower. Buses make double runs to offset the additional expenditures.

VII. ANALYSIS OF APPROACH

A Favorable Consensus

On the whole the minority community did and does support the Greenville district. Some who expected, perhaps, instantly improved education for their children are now beginning to raise questions about education in general. So are some of the white parents who had not looked too closely into what was going on in public schools before desegregation brought them under scrutiny.

While judgment tended to hover around the middle and lean toward the negative side at the beginning of desegregation, almost everyone now concurs that Greenville, across the board, supports desegregation, no longer has doubts, and believes the actions taken have actually improved the education of its children.

"It (desegregation) certainly hasn't hurt," says one member of the school board whose own youngsters are in public school. In fact, all the board members and most old-line leaders in the business and plantation community have kept their children in Greenville Municipal Separate District schools.

Except at top level administration, desegregation has been almost total. Although some administrators feel that desegregation by grade level does create some transportation problems that affect the high school academic and sports activities, they maintain that they would not go back to the old way. Board members doubt that the city could have unified its system in any other fashion.

The effects on staff and students have been for the most part positive. In spite of the slight inconvenience of a little additional travel time, students say they would have it no other way--that they never want to go back to separate and unequal systems.

Lingering Problems

The initial loss of about 15 to 19 percent of the white students through flight to private schools was the major development during implementation. There was no violence or particular disciplinary problems. If anything, old trivial confrontations over dress codes and other minor matters were laid to rest as students, teachers, and parents dealt with the larger issues of learning to work and live with one another.

The single greatest problem, according to white administrators, remains how to woo back the students from the private academies and create in the schools a closer approximation of the real world mix of people than is offered by the present illusory majority of blacks and low-income students.

Members of the black community view the loss of status among black staff members and loss of pride among black students as more serious problems than the loss of some white students. "Good; we got rid of the soreheads," says one parent.

Students, black and white, feel the most oppressive restraint on their behavior and good will toward one another has been the veritable ban on social events imposed by the school administration. When it implemented its "freedom of choice" plan--prior to the court order--the board eliminated such events as "proms" as official school functions. "Perhaps," mused one school board member, "it is time to 'experiment' with things like dances."

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

In the South, civil rights leaders have long maintained that tokenism--the practice of many districts in meeting court orders--is self-defeating. Such minimal and reluctant efforts to comply with only the letter of the law fail through fear and flight. That rare phenomenon, integration of students, staff, and studies, is apparently what works best for all concerned--especially when the community believes the remedies are being applied equitably and have as their basis enhancement of education.

Greenville, Mississippi, might serve as an illustration of the principle that where such a comprehensive approach is combined with good leadership and good will, desegregation works and works well.

The desegregation of the Greenville Municipal District has been very nearly total--perhaps, in fact, a little too complete for some in the minority community. As was pointed out over and over to the interviewers by black teachers, parents, and students, the identity of a vital black institution has been absorbed in the unification process. There appears to be a wish for more of what Eldridge McMillan of the Southern Education Foundation calls the "tossed salad approach" to desegregation, which allows for heterogeneity though all the ingredients are contained in a single bowl.

Still, the Greenville public schools and community get "A" marks not only for effort but also for results. The city's plan for achieving a unified system seems to be unusual in that attention is being paid to the intent as well as the letter of the law that separate is not equal. After a court order and the fact of desegregation much always remains to be done to support the emergent sense of pride of black youngsters, to move black staff into the school management mainstream, and to permit freer social interchange among students. A recognition of this larger dimension has been and remains a part of the Greenville desegregation formula.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise credited, information in this report is derived from interviews conducted by members of the Mississippi Advisory Committee and staff of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in early 1976 in Greenville, Mississippi.

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