

Washington Reports on Public School Integration

Thoughtful planning and skilled leadership have assisted in the success of the desegregation program of the District of Columbia Public Schools.

DURING the year 1954-55, the schools of the nation's capital began a program of racial desegregation. This first-year program resulted in more than three-fourths of the city's schools having interracial enrollment, affecting more than two-thirds of the city's school children. A number of schools had interracial faculties. The program covered all levels, from elementary schools through the teachers' college. Desegregation thus represented a considerable change in school organization and affected the vast majority of school personnel.

The Washington experience may be particularly instructive for other communities because of the wide variety of patterns that have emerged in the Washington schools. There are schools with only one or two children of the minority race, sometimes white and sometimes Negro. There are those with nearly half and half Negro and white. There are a few instances where a formerly white school became more than two-thirds Negro when the desegregation program began. There are Negro teachers assigned to all-white schools and white teachers assigned to

all-Negro schools. Supervisors of both races are serving schools having all these complex patterns and working with principals and teachers of both races.

The experience has been one of conspicuous success. There were those who doubted themselves who found that they did well. Many came with prejudice and had experiences of sufficient depth to show them a better way of relating to others. Many feared a year of chaos, only to find school proceeding as smoothly as before.

How, then, have school personnel found the means to do the commendable job with which they are justly credited? The answers suggested here are those which relate to (a) the official policy established by the Board of Education; (b) the experience which teachers and administrators have had in learning to meet the situation; and (c) procedures which have

Irene Osborne, formerly Washington representative of the Community Relations Program, is now consultant on school integration, American Friends Service Committee.

been found to be sound in giving help to those responsible on the day-by-day level.

Board of Education Policy: The Frame of Reference

In its basic statement of policy governing the desegregated school system, the Board of Education made unmistakably clear that it intended the schools to operate color-blind, giving no favor or handicap to anyone because of race. The following quotations from the Board's policy statement are definitive:

"No pupil of the public schools shall be favored or discriminated against in any matter or in any manner respecting his or her relationship to the schools of the District of Columbia by reason of race or color. . . .

"We affirm our intention to secure the right of every child, within his own capacity, to the full, equal and impartial use of all school facilities, and the right of all qualified teachers to teach where needed within the school system." (From Board of Education statement adopted May 25, 1954.)

The clarity of this policy was of first importance as a guide for the operation of the school program. As one principal stated, "Policy must come from above. This gives us the security we need to go ahead and do a job." Within the framework of the policy, individual principals and teachers are free to proceed by calling upon their own professional skill and personal resources.

Experience: Learning To Meet the New Situation

The most usual experience which school personnel have had, and the most certain guide to effective functioning, is the discovery that race in and of itself is not important. No prob-

lem is purely and simply a race problem. No one's actions can be understood wholly in terms of his being "a Negro" or "a white person." Situations which arise involving a white person and a Negro differ from other situations only in the degree of anxiety which tends to surround the subject of race in American communities.

A few examples will clarify the central importance of anxiety. A white child and a Negro child get into a fight on the playground. The teacher has in the past seen many fights between two children and has developed some effective techniques for dealing with the situation. These techniques will be equally effective if the fight happens to be between children of different races, unless the teacher is hampered by his own anxious feelings about race.

A child enrolls in a class late, has no friends in the school, and is inclined to be timid, withdrawn, and barely adequate in his work. Every teacher has experience with such a problem and has some techniques for helping the child. If the withdrawn child is a white child in a "Negro school," or a Negro child in a "white school," the teacher can function as effectively as usual to the extent that he can avoid being over-anxious about the child because of his race.

A Negro mother complained to school officials of ill treatment of her child at school. She told such a harrowing tale of abuse that the supervisor felt there must have been active discrimination against the child. Angry, she went to investigate. She found that the child was aggressive and troublesome, bullying other children and harassing teachers. He had met with

retaliation and rejection as a consequence of his own actions. Seeing that the problem was not a racial one, the supervisor was able to give help to the principal and teacher. She interpreted the difficulty as that of a maladjusted and disturbed child and a mother who could not see her son realistically.

This is not to deny that problems exist. It would be folly to believe that all trouble will disappear if it is ignored. The important truth is rather that the problem is not race, nor desegregation, nor Negro people, nor white people; rather, the problem is the anxiety which people have about the situation.

Inevitably, the people with whom we deal—parents, children and school personnel—bring with them some feelings about race, ranging from outright bigotry to a vague unease. In doing so, they reflect an unresolved problem in the community, in the nation as a whole, and, indeed, in the entire world. The lesson for school people is that it is for them to meet bigotry with principle, fear with sureness, prejudice with an uncluttered view of the individual person, unease with ease.

Some examples show how troubled situations can be calmed and resolved. A principal received a phone call from a white mother who showed hostility and anxiety because her child was to have a Negro teacher. The principal replied easily in an agreeable, conversational manner, "I believe Miss X is an excellent teacher. She was hired because she is the best qualified person we could find for the job. Let's give it a try and see how it works." The parent did not call again, and her child adjusted well in the classroom.

A little Negro girl had transferred into a formerly white school. On Halloween she came to her teacher and said she would not be present for the party that afternoon as she wanted to attend the one given at the school where she attended last year. The teacher replied, in sympathetic tones, "I can understand that. Sometimes when we leave a place, we like to go back. However, we will miss you here." The child was back that afternoon, and attended the Halloween party with the rest of her class.

A white parent was irate because his daughter used the same shower room as the Negro girls. He complained to the principal. The principal replied firmly, "All the facilities of the school are available to everyone. No one has any priority. We cannot and will not make special rules about race. This is not a white school nor a Negro school, but the school for the children who attend here." No other parent raised objection.

Procedure: Giving Help in Getting Started

In all these situations, school personnel answered well because they themselves were untroubled. They could meet anger, fear and unease effectively without reflecting back and adding to the situation anxieties of their own. Their strength lay in an ability to see people as individuals and to value each one. A good teacher has this orientation and will learn in a real situation that race is truly no measure of the person. As one supervisor said, "We are dealing with the problems of children, not of Negro and white children."

It follows from the above that the most important help which can be given to school personnel, once policy has been established, is assistance of a type which will allay anxieties and build security about the new situation.

Ultimately, the teacher or administrator is dealing with his own racial feeling. His greatest need is to remove his own prejudice and undue awareness of race. There is no quick way to do this for him in advance of desegregation, but he can be given substantial help in understanding that his own feelings count for good or ill and are his first and inescapable responsibility.

The District of Columbia school system offered a series of workshops for administrative officers in the spring prior to the start of the desegregation program. Workshops were held on an area basis, always interracial, with about thirty in attendance. Each workshop devoted two days to discussion of anticipated problems, possible solutions and available resources. Principals then planned how they could best work with their own faculties.

In addition, each teacher attended one of two large meetings where a noted anthropologist spoke on the facts of race and the nature of prejudice. No one expected that one lecture could "cure" anyone's prejudices, but such an official and forthright presentation did help to establish the needed frame of reference.

Perhaps more important than these formal procedures for training are the ways which can be found to give continuing help as the year progresses. Those in a supervisory or administrative role use regular channels of meetings and committees and conferences.

The following steps seem important:

Find ways to re-emphasize and revitalize the orientation of the teacher toward seeing the unique quality and worth of every child.

Note examples of effective handling of situations, aimed toward giving teachers a feeling of confidence that their equipment as teachers will stand them in good stead.

Make available materials which will help teachers to do a better job from the point of view of curriculum. The history teacher can learn more about the contributions of all peoples; the English teacher, about how to handle stereotypes, and so on in every field.

Maintain an atmosphere of permissiveness in teachers' meetings and administrative conferences. Problems can then be solved by open discussion. It will not be healthful nor helpful to place a taboo on discussions of race nor to make teachers feel that they should not have any problems.

Keep a weather eye out for those who are floundering and need some help. Potentially excellent teachers may encounter difficulties which can be overcome by timely guidance.

Maintain a sense of relaxation and good humor. As desegregation begins, school personnel are too apt to feel that they are "on trial" and under a terrible necessity to succeed.

The first year in Washington has demonstrated that desegregation is a healthful and constructive process. Among school people there is no little surprise that so much that is meaningful has happened in a year. Many have felt a new awareness that the values of education are in terms of human personality.

Copyright © 1955 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.