

What School People Have Learned about Integration

With insight and objectivity this author reviews some of the learnings which can benefit school people as they face the complex problems of integration.

EVERY school person will probably have a different notion as to what school people have learned about integration. The answer depends upon the locality, tradition and past experiences of the school people concerned.

Examples of divergent reactions within a given locality are apparent to even the most casual observer. Clinton and Oak Ridge, Tennessee, are located only six miles apart; yet in Oak Ridge desegregation occurred with a minimum of outward turmoil, while Clinton was the center of intense disturbances. Louisville, Kentucky, evolved one of the smoothest transitions from segregated schools to complete integration; yet the school officials of Clay and Sturgis, Kentucky, were faced with violent opposition to the same issue. In the state of Arkansas several schools peacefully integrated while in Hoxie and Little Rock the reaction has been one of strong resistance. In each community local school people have learned about a small segment of the larger picture of integration.

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Voluntary Integration

There appears to be limited evidence, that if integration is to occur, it will proceed on a more peaceful basis when conducted from a voluntary plan rather than a court order. Examples of peaceful voluntary desegregation are found in Louisville, Kentucky, and Oak Ridge, Tennessee. More publicized examples of court ordered integration and turmoil are symbolized by Clay and Sturgis, Kentucky; Clinton and Nashville, Tennessee; Mansfield, Texas; Little Rock and Hoxie, Arkansas. Of course many people argue that nationwide integration will never occur unless the Federal Courts force it upon communities.

Morale

If a school system plans to desegregate, guide lines may be available as a result of past integration experiences. Perhaps the most important guide line relates to the morale of the community, faculty and student body. An important element in the development of good morale involves cooperative planning on the part of all persons concerned with the problem. The best efforts of parents, teachers, students, and all interested citi-

zens should be secured in planning for integration.

Cooperative Planning

Existing organizations such as the PTA, civic clubs, women's groups, labor unions, and churches are a few of the lay groups which might be involved. A word of caution should be injected at this point. Be sure that *all people concerned* have a part in the planning, or at least are kept well informed.

Some of the individuals who objected most violently to integration in Clinton claim that they were not aware of plans to desegregate Clinton High School. In Louisville, Kentucky, Dr. Omer Carmichael, superintendent of schools, avoided this objection by conducting a house-to-house visitation to inform the community of desegregation plans.

Good morale and cooperative planning by school faculties are essential to the ultimate success of any integration plan. Upon teachers are placed the basic problems of making integration work. They are in direct contact with the first meetings of Negro and white students.

In the case of Clinton High School, the teachers were a most important cog. Never at any time did a single teacher weaken in the school policy of dealing with every student fairly. Despite tremendous pressures the *esprit de corps* of the teachers seemed to strengthen rather than weaken.

In cooperative planning for integration the superintendent of schools, the board of education, the principals, and teachers should be united in their efforts toward integration. It is true that there will be opposing beliefs as to the principle of desegregation in many communities. But after the decision to integrate has been reached, either by voluntary compliance or by court order, each

division of the school system should have a part in planning how desegregation is to occur. After final plans are approved, each level of the educational system should be expected to share its portion of the responsibility for proper execution. Morale is enhanced when people work together on the plan to be used.

Communication

Every available channel of communication should be kept open to the general public. Students should be allowed to discuss freely the issue of segregation versus integration. Debates, panel discussions, and theme writing were used in Clinton. These methods seem to afford fair and honest media for formulating opinions. Students are active channels of communication between the school and the home. The press, radio, television, and other news agencies will be searching for information about desegregation plans. They are entitled to receive truthful information.

Sometimes reporters may create a problem. At the height of the "Clinton Story" there were over 80 different reporters and cameramen in this small community at one time. Each reporter was seeking an exclusive story. Confronted by many problems of school administration in a tense situation the proper school authority will be well advised to meet with all of the reporters at the same time. This saves the administrator's time and makes the information available to all on the same basis.

Partial Desegregation

The partial desegregation of a school system may cause some confusion in the thinking of poorly informed persons. They may ask, "Why does school X integrate when other schools in the same system do not?" Direct inquiry may be

made as to why only one public school in a state is forced to integrate. When only one school is forced to desegregate, outside racists can mobilize irresponsible forces against the school concerned. Not only was Clinton, Tennessee, invaded by racists from other localities within the state, they came from such outside places as New Jersey, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. This one small school system suffered the brunt of attack from persons who neither lived in the community nor had any responsibility to it. It would thus appear advisable and fortunate for desegregation to occur on a broad basis if and when it is undertaken.

Responsible Community Leadership

School people recognize the value of responsible community leadership. There appears to be a small segment of white people favoring and working for school integration in the border states of the South. However, in some communities, responsible leadership dislikes violence more than desegregation. As some irresponsible segregationists have resorted to violence, responsible local citizens who abhor such reactions can offer "middle-ground" leadership to replace the leadership of extremists on either side of the issue. In many communities responsible leaders are not willing to accept anarchy as a solution to their problems. They believe that if the United States Supreme Court is wrong that the decision can be changed by legal means without resorting to violence.

Threats and Intimidation

If the past three years have taught school people anything about integration it is the fact that attempts will be made to intimidate responsible officials. Common tactics involve the use of threats by

telephone and letter. The purpose is to destroy the mental and physical health and stamina of persons in leadership capacities. Lies and misinterpretation of fact are used to lower the status of school leaders in the eyes of the public.

On the other hand the educator will find support if he is trying to do an honest job. During the heat of the Clinton, Tennessee, controversy the writer received hundreds of letters that came from 37 different states and 13 foreign countries. Before the Edward R. Murrow television show, "See It Now" on *Clinton and the Law* (January 1957), the mail ratio was three to one favoring obedience to the United States Supreme Court decision that schools should desegregate with all deliberate speed; after the Murrow program this ratio increased from three to one to one hundred to one.

Internal School Problems

The writer has often been asked, "What are the problems within a desegregated school?" In the case of Clinton High School, internal problems were created by adults outside of the school. It was reported by several white students that they were encouraged to start fights with Negro boys. In November of 1956, an organized group of white teenagers started wearing large badges with the slogan "Keep White Schools White" imprinted upon them. There were about 25 students involved in this activity and it lasted for about three weeks.

The faculty of Clinton High School followed a policy of patience in dealing with students of divergent beliefs in regard to integration. However, patience alone did not solve all problems. Decisions were made on each individual problem on a basis of respect for the rights of individual students without

overlooking the welfare of the total school population.

Students in Clinton High School played an important role in the integration process. As early as 1950, when Negroes first applied for admission, students were allowed to discuss the issue of desegregation in a free and open manner. Opinions were formed by students during the discussions. These discussions were continued throughout the years before actual integration. Eventually the students "talked themselves out" and, as a group, accepted the responsibilities involved.

Throughout the first year of integration (1956-57) the majority of the students conducted themselves in an exemplary manner. During the period of heavy turmoil outside of the school building most of the students went peacefully about their business. The student council and the football team were outstanding in leading the other students in their respect for the rights of others. Early in the school year the student body went on record favoring obedience to the court order in regard to integration. School people will be well advised to encourage students to participate in planning for integration.

In reviewing the question of "What have school people learned about integration?" the writer would like to summarize his opinions as follows:

1. There is not a clear pattern as to what a community may expect when it integrates.
2. Voluntary integration seems to work better than enforced integration.

3. Community morale can be developed by participation in cooperative planning.

4. Various channels of communication should be used to keep the public informed.

5. Partial desegregation may lead to misunderstanding and unnecessary hardship to the parties involved.

6. Responsible community leadership can be utilized by school people to aid in combating pressures.

7. School officials should expect attempts at personal intimidation.

8. Internal school problems can be met partially by the attitudes of the faculty and student body.

Southern educators are faced with tremendous problems involved in school desegregation. They are being enveloped by community pressures. Their security and their professional futures are at stake. State legislatures have enacted twenty-three different laws to prevent or forestall integration. School people are figuratively caught in the jaws of a vise comprised of legal contradictions, public opinion and professional welfare.

Not only are Negroes being embarrassed by discrimination; but also a goodly number of white administrators and teachers (of which there is already a shortage) are being made unbearably miserable and in some cases are forced out of the profession.

What is the answer? In this writer's opinion, our hope of salvation lies in public enlightenment and the American heritage of fair play.

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