

What To Do About

ROADBLOCKS TO DESEGREGATION

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SUPERINTENDENTS, principals, teachers and board members alike have been greatly affected by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Each one has been challenged to work on the great social and educational problems occasioned by school desegregation. The South Florida School Desegregation Consulting Center of the University of Miami under contract with the U.S. Office of Education was funded especially to help 23 county school systems in South Florida with these problems.

All counties in South Florida had some student desegregation in the fall of 1965. Several were desegregated for the first time while others had begun as long as five years ago. One county closed its Negro campus and combined all students and staff members into one desegregated school system. Another county had less than ten Negro students in a biracial situation.

One activity of the Consulting Center has been a series of drive-in conferences for secondary school personnel. These conferences were two day sessions held in different geographic locations to accommodate persons from several contiguous county school systems of similar size and composition. Participants included school board members, superintendents, county staff members, principals and teachers from secondary schools in each county school district.

The drive-in conferences were designed to appraise current conditions and to identify the aspirations of educators working in a desegregated school program. The conference provided the educators through open discussion an opportunity to identify roadblocks between aspirations and the status quo. The basic idea was that if certain barriers could be clearly recognized by the participants then they

might take some meaningful action to reduce the gap between the ideal and the real school situation.

Study Procedures

A special procedure was followed to encourage open discussion and a commitment to a plan of action. Participants were designated arbitrarily as "A," "B," or "C" and grouped in triads. Following a training and demonstration session the triad members cross-examined each other on what they considered major concerns. The person speaking tried to convey his feelings while the other two raised questions, pushed for clarification or pointed out assumptions.

A half hour time block was used which involved about ten minutes for "B" and "C" to help "A" develop meaningful statements on a worksheet, for "Nature of the Present Situation" and "What I Would Like To See Happen Concerning the Situation." Similar ten minute sessions were held for both "B" and "C."

Another half hour session followed with ten minute intervals to allow participants to develop a third worksheet item, "Diagnosis—Why It Is Not Possible Under Current Conditions." The last half hour period was used to develop an "Action Plan." Each participant formulated a plan to help remove roadblocks in his own school situation.

Although the school systems varied widely in number of students, attitude of community, educational philosophy and time in a desegregated situation, two common roadblocks to desegregation were identified from an analysis of the triad worksheets. Except for the county which had already phased out its Negro schools and desegregated the teaching staffs, faculty desegregation was mentioned most frequently. This was a concern of small and large systems alike. Whether a system had begun desegregation for the first year or had already been desegregated five years was of no importance. The concern was the same. In the county where staff desegregation was complete, staff desegregation was not mentioned.

The other problem mentioned in all instances was in-service education as it related to helping teachers from various cultural backgrounds to interact professionally, to help understand students from a different cultural background, to improve teacher competence or to improve the total school program.

Perhaps the most important point found in the worksheet analysis was that school systems in the first year of desegregation were primarily concerned with in-service education in social relations such as working with students and other teachers from different cultural backgrounds, while those who had previously experienced desegregation were primarily concerned about educational problems such as motivation, academic achievement and self-image. The longer a school system had been desegregated, the greater the concern was for the educational problems.

Other major roadblocks identified were expanded educational services, Negro students' low achievement scores, elimination of prejudice and need for more student desegregation. As in the in-service education problem, the order of

importance of these roadblocks was apparently affected by the amount of time which had elapsed in actual school desegregation.


If it is reasonable to assume that these are actual roadblocks, several generalizations can be made. The most obvious is that school systems beginning to desegregate can expect a rather definite pattern of problems to arise. The pattern will probably start with social problems and move gradually into educational problems. The latter tend to be the same ones encountered by educators in the past. However, with high influx of Negro students, previous curricular inadequacies for the poorly academically oriented tend to be accentuated. Poor student achievement and low motivation will likely be the most prominent concern.

Although the social problems concerning race may well become serious deterrents to school progress, they tend to disappear rapidly. At first everyone is uncertain and apparently afraid of one another. As the different groups get acquainted, the fears are found to be ungrounded. If this is so, it would be reasonable to assume that staff desegregation will only be a temporary roadblock.

Recommendations

In the early stages of school or staff desegregation adequate preparation for all teachers, staff and pupils involved should be made. This need not be elaborate because the unrest and fears tend to subside as face-to-face relations come about. Discussions on race, civil rights, the law, discrimination and prejudice are helpful. Panel groups or visitations with peers who have already been through desegregation are usually quite effective. Other things may be done, but the most important point is that any well designed program will give those involved the idea that desegregation is expected to come about peacefully.

New curricular designs must be made by individual schools as they begin desegregation. Special studies of the student population should be made and faculty workshops should be organized in order to develop plans and materials for the new curriculum. It can be expected that lack of motivation for school work, unbelievably low reading ability, low aspirations, and poor self image will be outstanding problems.

Probably the most important thing the present day educator will do in his professional career is help resolve the problems of school desegregation. The road to desegregation will sometimes be hazardous and full of detours but when the educators get back on the main highway to good education, all the children in this great nation will be on the bus. 



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