



Promising Developments in Integration

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PUBLIC school integration has been successful in Portageville, a Missouri bootheel town with strong Southern sentiments. Total integration here has worked for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is the fact that the quality of education for all students has improved during the time that integration was in progress. The school board, the faculty, and the students tried hard to make it work because they could see that things were improving for them.

I became superintendent of the Portageville Reorganized School District Number One on July 1, 1961. The district at that time operated a segregated school system. The system included a central elementary school, two small outlying elementary schools, and three small elementary schools for Negro children. These latter schools were buildings with coal stoves, outdoor toilets, and no lunch program.

The district also operated a segregated high school and transported Negro high school students on a tuition basis to Hayti Central High School, a Negro school located 14 miles south in a neighboring county.

The Board of Education was aware of the situation and was anxious to correct the injustices in the district, and also, to improve

the quality of the school in general. The board abandoned its tentative plans to construct a new Negro school, correctly believing it would be out of line with the times before its completion since integration must be the goal, regardless of the attitude of the local population.

Plans were adopted to bring all white elementary students into the central elementary school and to bring all Negro elementary students into one of the vacated elementary schools which included central heat, indoor restrooms, and a lunch program. Special education classes were established, a music and art supervisor employed, and a full-time principal assigned to the new centralized Negro school.

A new cafeteria, with two serving lines, was constructed for the white central elementary and high school students. New buses were purchased to transport Negro students to the centralized elementary school.

The school board adopted a straight nine-months term of school beginning in September 1963. This change applied to both white and Negro schools. The district had

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previously operated a split term. At this time a school nurse, a speech correctionist, and an elementary physical education supervisor were employed and assigned on a pro rata basis to both the white and the Negro schools.

In December of 1963 the Missouri State Department of Education classified the Portageville School District AAA, which is the top classification. In April of 1964 the Board of Education adopted a Desegregation Plan, copies of which were submitted to the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The plan was accepted by HEW on June 28, 1965.

The plan for desegregation of the Portageville Schools was completed as scheduled. On December 19, 1967, HEW approved Form 441 status for the district and the Portageville Reorganized School District Number One was recognized officially as a completely integrated school system.

"Separate but Equal"

At this point the requirements had been met. The school was open for all the children of the district without regard to race and opportunities were equal for all children enrolled. However, there is far more to successfully implementing a plan of integration than merely accepting all children into a school system.

A large majority of the Negro children were educationally deprived because of their recent separate but very unequal opportunities in a segregated school. Most of the Negro children were also economically deprived and could not pay minor fees. Few could afford thirty cents for a school lunch. Many were unable to purchase towels for physical education class, and some of those who could did not have plumbing at home for laundering their towels and physical education uniforms. Also, these students, with few exceptions, were unable to afford the price of admission for school activities, such as dances and athletic events.

To make matters worse, there were few Negro staff members for the children to identify with. It was obvious that the Negro

children did not have a sense of belonging and, to say the least, were bewildered.

The white children for the most part did not accept Negro children. They did not antagonize them so much as ignore them. This might have been expected, for in many cases the parents were more opposed to integration than were the children. The economic deprivation of the Negro children, reflected in soiled clothing, physical education uniforms, towels, etc., contributed even more to the reluctant attitude of the white children to accept them.

Portageville is located in the Southeast Missouri Delta area very near the Mississippi River and has basically an agricultural economy with emphasis on the production of cotton. With the recent mechanization of farming and the more recent use of chemicals in the agriculture industry, the area has more economically deprived families, both white and Negro, and as a general rule, the economically deprived family is also educationally and culturally deprived.

A Search for Solutions

The Board of Education and the administration were very much aware of the problems, but we had reached a point where we needed solutions.

To begin the search for solutions to our problems the Board of Education made it clear that, regardless of the past, the prevailing attitude of the population, or their own personal attitudes regarding integration, the change had arrived with the U.S. Supreme Court Decision of 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Integration was the law, and the Board of Education adopted an unwritten policy urging the administration to do as much as possible as soon as possible rather than as little as possible as slowly as possible. This was a very necessary and commendable decision on the part of the Board of Education.

The next break in finding solutions to our problems was the utilization of federal funds from Title I, made available by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Child Nutrition Act, and Head Start Pro-

grams under the Office of Economic Opportunity.

To comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and also to give the Negro children staff members with whom they could identify, the Board of Education employed eight Negro teachers. One was a music teacher who taught all elementary children two periods per week. This made it possible for the white children to experience instruction by a Negro teacher. The public also was aware of this when the annual elementary school music program was directed by the Negro teacher. Another Negro teacher was assigned a kindergarten class and on a half-day basis taught two classes of five-year-old children. Another Negro teacher was assigned to teach high school boys physical education classes, two were assigned to remedial math and remedial reading classes, and three to special education classes. Also employed were four Negro bus drivers, four custodians, and four cafeteria workers.

Title I funds were used to provide classes for slow achievers limited to 20 students per class. These classes averaged about 60 percent Negro students. Title I funds provided lunches for all economically deprived children and the Child Nutrition Act provided breakfast for the economically deprived elementary children. A social worker was employed to help cope with the personal needs of students, particularly for clothing and health. Fees were paid and tickets were provided to school activities for all economically deprived students. The school cooperates with the Office of Economic Opportunity and with Head Start Programs each year; this greatly benefits the deprived child. Title I funds also made possible the installation of two commercial laundries which provide fresh, clean uniforms and towels each day. The school installed private showers for girls; these are used at the end of physical education classes. A band is employed for the annual homecoming dance and the annual junior-senior prom, and both events are completely integrated.

An annual banquet attended by all participants in football, basketball, and track, with their fathers as guests, has been very

successful. The success of Negro boys in athletics has been good for all concerned.

One Negro girl in junior high school was elected to the cheerleading squad. Several Negro students have become members of the school chapter of the National Honor Society.

The new school cafeteria has two serving lines so that the school can operate a closed campus. All students eat in the cafeteria or bring their lunches. Never more than half of the students are out for lunch at one time and no one leaves the campus until school is dismissed. All students are supervised at all times.

Our school enrollment, kindergarten through grade 12, is 1,400. Four hundred pupils are Negro. We employ three counselors and three principals, two for elementary schools and one for high school. Schools are primary K-3, middle 4-6, and high school 7-12.

To summarize, we integrated successfully and are proud of the accomplishment. Many factors contributed to the success. Briefly, these factors were:

1. Strong and wise Board of Education
2. Federal funds
3. Faculty dedication
4. Counseling staff to determine needs of students
5. Establishment of special education classes, slow achiever classes, remedial instruction to meet needs of students
6. Supplementary benefits: breakfast, lunches, fees, activity tickets, laundries, and private showers
7. Recognition: athletics and National Honor Society
8. Cooperation and support by the Negro population
9. Progressive increase in acceptance by the white population
10. Emphasis on responsibilities as well as rights.

The real success of our schools is not that all of the children are enrolled in one system, but that the great majority now have a sense of belonging and feel that it is truly *their* school. □

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