

Leadership for Successful School Desegregation



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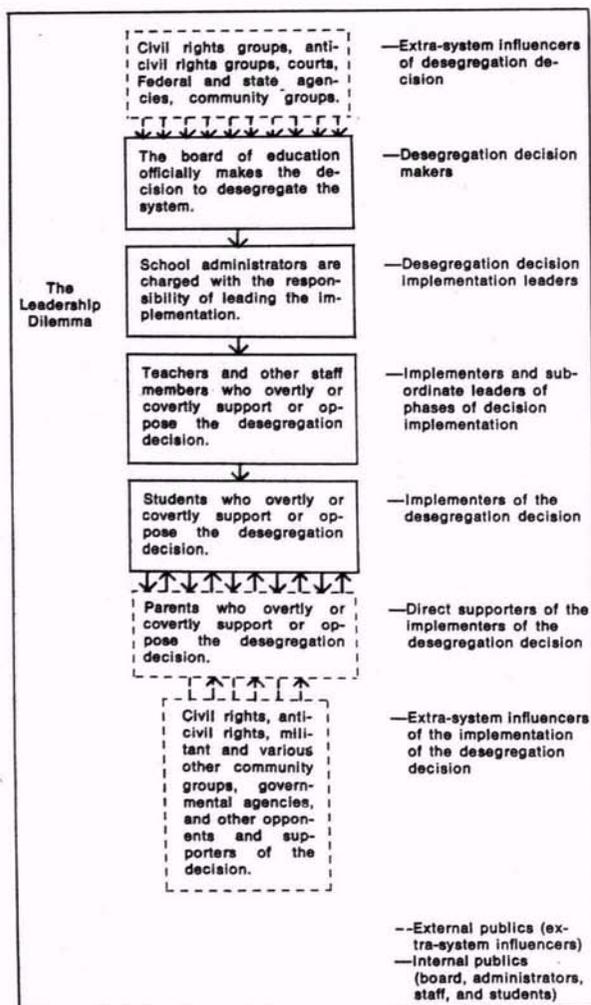


Figure 1. The Desegregation Leadership Dilemma for School Administrators

Superintendents who successfully meet the challenge of school desegregation assess the situation of each school, provide for communication, focus on potential student benefits, and demonstrate personal commitment.

When school systems are desegregated, school administrators¹ are frequently caught in the middle. They may have influenced the decision to desegregate, but they do not make the official decision. The board of education does that. Nevertheless, it is the school administrator who must lead the implementation of the board's decision—a decision often influenced by pressure groups, the courts, and state and federal agencies. This implementation may be covertly or overtly accepted or rejected by students, staff, and community groups (Figure 1).

In spite of the magnitude of the challenge, many administrators have successfully achieved effective school desegregation. To develop a better understanding of their leadership behavior, I reviewed the literature on desegregation and conducted a survey of school administrators.

Questionnaires were sent to 158 school superintendents randomly selected from districts with a black population of at least ten percent. Responses received from administrators in 32 states well distributed throughout the country were analyzed for: (1) patterns of conflict, management procedures, and specific behavioral acts that tended to stimulate desirable and undesirable individual and group responses; and (2)

¹ The term "school administrators" refers primarily to superintendents but also to other line administrators (assistant superintendents, directors, principals).



The reward of successful desegregation

techniques that tended to minimize or avoid crises, conflict, and controversy.²

Some of the respondents may have given more positive or negative descriptions of the situation and their behavior than is accurate, but I believe they reported accurately *their perceptions* of what took place.

Key Findings

Some of the key findings were: (1) Peak periods of conflict occurred most frequently during the fall. Though considerably less often, spring was another period of comparatively frequent conflict. (2) Conflicts were more verbal than physical. (3) Initial mandates to desegregate came about equally from the courts and from local boards of education. Almost *two-thirds* of those originating from court orders were from the South and half of those originating from board action were from the Midwest. (4) School administrators acted quite differently prior to peak periods of conflict, but most of their actions focused on involvement of and communication with significant community groups. Organization and effective planning for that involvement appeared to be critical factors. (5) The effective implementation of a desegregation plan and the establishment of improved communication links with community groups were the most rewarding experiences for the superintendents. (6) Community organizations, teachers, and

parents were the most helpful groups in minimizing the negative effects of conflicts. Other groups, including students, administrators, and auxiliary staffs, also played a supporting role. (7) Those administrators who would change their behavior if faced with a similar conflict situation indicated they would try for more involvement and communication with community groups, and weigh more carefully and anticipate the consequences of pending administrative actions. (8) Supplying accurate information and involving key individuals were deemed to be crucial in stimulating desirable responses from groups. (9) Conflict occurred in a variety of forms and the situations were frequently aggravated by both the administrator's actions and by failure to act. (10) Approaches that focused on facilitating interaction between and among individuals and groups appeared to be most effective.

There are, no doubt, many aspects of the leadership thrust of the administrator that are important in desegregation. Those that surface most readily are a tendency to: (1) exhibit a positive personal commitment to goal attainment; (2) assess the dynamics of each school situation; (3) provide for effective communication with diverse school related groups, including an efficient school-community feedback system; and (4) focus attention on the potential student benefits of organizational and programmatic changes.

² Additional information and/or a summary of the study may be obtained by contacting the writer.

Personal Commitment

One of the most important qualities of an effective leader is his/her demonstrated commitment to goal attainment. Gross and Herriott³ found in their classic study that the executive leadership of the principal's immediate superior was positively related to the executive professional leadership behavior of the school principal. Forehand and others,⁴ in their study of conditions and practices of effective school desegregation in 96 elementary and 72 high schools, found that the principal's racial attitude had a direct influence on the attitudes of teachers, and that teachers' attitudes had a direct effect on the attitudes of white students, in both elementary and secondary schools. This principle of superordinate behavior influencing subordinate behavior is evident in a number of desegregation situations.

"... the principal's racial attitude had a direct influence on the attitudes of the teachers and that teachers' attitudes had a direct effect on the attitudes of white students . . ."

More than one-fourth of the superintendents who replied to my survey said that providing leadership for the successful implementation of desegregation was their most successful and/or rewarding experience, and many of them felt their demonstrated personal commitment contributed to that success. A *Milwaukee Journal* feature story⁵ discussed the important role Superintendent Lee McMurrin played in the peaceful desegregation of that city's schools. It focused on his demonstrated commitment, as well as his positive and optimistic attitude about the plan. His leadership was also mentioned in other articles written about the success of desegregation in Milwaukee.^{6,7}

I agree with Green⁸ that advocacy is the key to leadership of the urban school superintendent. Major changes in school systems usually need "prodding by someone with clout."⁹ However, that advocacy is often questioned. In a study of desegregation of eight cities, Crain and others¹⁰ found that in six of the eight cities studied, school integration quickly led to conflict between various groups and the superintendent.

The uncertainties that accompany a major desegregation effort often contribute to distrust of school authorities. In the Saginaw staff integration

case, the teacher association leader made it clear his group would support the moves of the administration if the "board did not play games with the contract."¹¹ The judge in the Dallas desegregation case ruled that school officials were to "cease 'playing games' and surrender 'meaningful' data to the Dallas minority plaintiff."¹² To avoid skepticism, rumors, and counter-productive controversy, the administrator's commitment must be characterized by honesty and by presentation of complete and accurate information about proposed changes.

Appraisal of the Situation

An important facet of leadership thrust is assessing the uniqueness of each school situation. Timing, climate, nature of the interpersonal and group relationships, existing organization and programs, and physical and financial resources are all factors which should be assessed. Crain and others,¹³ Kirby and others,¹⁴ and Mayer and others¹⁵ all delineate the dominant role that community elites (key influential persons) have played in desegregation. However, many of the respondents in my investigation identified minority church organizations and ministers, ghetto residents, parents, staff personnel, and other traditionally nonelitist groups as most helpful in the

³ Neal Gross and Robert E. Herriott, *Staff Leadership in Public Schools* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965), pp. 106-16.

⁴ Garlie H. Forehand, Marjorie Ragostra, and David A. Rock, *Conditions and Processes of Effective School Desegregation* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1976). ED 131-55.

⁵ David Bednarek, "Lee R. McMurrin: Optimist at Work," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 12 November 1978.

⁶ "The Buoyant Era of Lee McMurrin," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 16 November 1978.

⁷ "Successful School Administration," *The Educational Management Letter* (School Management Institute, Inc.) 6 (October 18, 1978).

⁸ Robert L. Green, "A Management Training Model for Urban School Administrators," presentation to school administrators, Del Paso Heights School District, Del Paso, Calif., December 7, 1973, ED 157-952.

⁹ "The Buoyant Era of Lee McMurrin."

¹⁰ Robert Crain and others, *The Politics of School Desegregation* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968), p. 123.

¹¹ William G. Scharffe, "Staff Integration in the Saginaw Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 60 (January 1979): 361-64.

¹² William W. Beck and Glen M. Linden, "Anglo and Minority Perceptions of Success in Dallas School Desegregation," *Phi Delta Kappan* 60 (January 1979): 378-82.

¹³ Crain and others.

¹⁴ David J. Kirby and others, *Political Strategies in Northern School Desegregation* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1973), pp. 9-140.

¹⁵ Robert R. Mayer and others, *The Impact of School Desegregation in a Southern City* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1974), pp. 17-110.

desegregation of their districts. Though the potential of the usually powerful elites should be recognized, other groups and individuals — regardless of their socioeconomic status — should also be acknowledged.

Involvement and Communication

One thing that almost all of the literature and the respondents in my investigation agree on is that involvement of and communication with people are important facets of the desegregation process. The question is with *whom*, *how*, *when*, and *why*? There is no one answer for all districts, but some guidelines are:

1. *Who?* — Both the internal (faculty and staff) and the external (community and agencies) publics should participate in planning and implementing the desegregation decision. Inasmuch as school districts and community groups tend not to agree on the identification of problems associated with desegregation,¹⁶ the need for interaction between the two seems evident. Multiethnic and multifaceted representation is essential. In addition to communication through the usual media, accurate information should be provided directly to various groups, including the opposition.

2. *How?* — A structured system for two-way communication and involvement should be established. The organization for securing community and staff input ought to include representatives of both pro and con viewpoints. One respondent to the questionnaire said unrest was caused by the board organizing a "stacked" advisory committee. Roles, functions, and legal limits of the authority of committees must be clarified. Groups need to be organized effectively for productive interaction. If the ad-

ministrator does not possess this organizational skill, he/she should secure competent assistance.

3. *When?* — Groups should generally be involved when decisions are being made rather than — as is generally the case — being asked to react to decisions already made. Success in reducing tension and in effective integration depends on the extent to which constituent groups were involved early in communicating and working together.¹⁷

4. *Why?* — The common expectation that open confrontation of racial feeling is a Pandora's box of destruction and chaos, the attitudes held by those unaccustomed to positive racial interaction,¹⁸ and the myths, uncertainties, and natural resistance to change are all valid reasons for effective communication with and involvement of those who must implement and support successful desegregation. Fear is an important element in the motivation of conflict.¹⁹ Through interaction, involvement, communication, and appropriate training, people usually identify important problems and collaboratively arrive at creative solutions.²⁰

¹⁶ George Robert Rhodes, Jr., "Problem Identification in Districts Undergoing Desegregation," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 36 (1975): 212A (The Catholic University of America).

¹⁷ Caesar Previdi and Mark Weiss, *Focus on Crisis Prevention: A Manual for School Administrators and Student Activities Personnel* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Education [DHEW], August 1976).

¹⁸ Kathleen Smith, ed., *Desegregation/Integration: Planning for Social Change* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1974), pp. 28-29.

¹⁹ Jack L. Palmer, "A Case Study in School-Community Conflict Over Desegregation," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 35 (1975): 5739A (University of Pittsburgh).

²⁰ Mark Shedd and others, "Developing Training for Big-city Principals," *Education and Urban Society* 6 (May 1974): 253-68.



Communication is important

Focus on Improved Instruction

I accept, with some important additions, Kirby and others'²¹ assertion that school desegregation plans must be designed by expert administrators within the system in order to be politically acceptable. The additions are that the design should be: (1) conceived creatively to meet some previously unmet needs of students served by the system; (2) presented effectively following the principles of two-way communication with the staff and community; and (3) structured expertly to reflect consideration of instructional improvement, the existing climate, and experiences of other systems.

Alternative designs to meet some unmet needs of students are plentiful.²² The magnet school concept is no doubt the most popular, but its successes are often diminished when the negative ramifications of such a design are not carefully considered.²³ The impact of alternatives on those students not directly involved must be considered, as should the relationship of family income to academic success and needs of students.²⁴

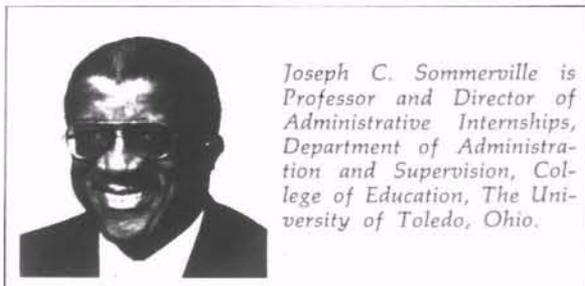
In presentation of the desegregation design, the administrator must effectively relate to the local situation.²⁵ Timing, unity, and consistency are important factors. Smith and others²⁶ stressed that the superintendent's initial speech is very influential in establishing attitudes of the entire community toward school desegregation, and opening day speeches of the school principal and superintendent should be consistent.

Harris says, "Leadership for improvement of instruction is still an urgent need in America, and is in very scarce supply."²⁷ Many districts (Dallas, Milwaukee, Seattle, and others) have achieved both desegregation and program improvement. Designs with such a dual focus are usually more successful.

I am not so naive as to suggest that the district administrator is solely responsible for improvement of instruction and integration of schools. The possible constraints on individual leadership are almost too numerous to mention — white flight; citizen and staff attitudes; the reluctance of courts, Congress, civil rights groups, and boards to act; and the racial demography of many school districts. Despite these barriers, however, each school administrator can and should provide leadership for achieving equitable opportunities for all students, upgrading the instructional program, and enabling students to experience and understand our multicultural society.

Meeting the Challenge

In summary, the administrator responsible for a successful program of school desegregation should:



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- Recognize that he/she, as the "person-in-the-middle," must effectively relate to both decision makers and implementers, and that he/she is likely to be the focus of reactions to the decision and its implementation.

- Assess climate, timing, and available resources; consider the experiences of other districts; and carefully develop a strategy for effectively implementing desegregation decisions.

- Accept the functions of organizing, coordinating, and involving representative individuals and groups in the desegregation process.

- Communicate effectively and continuously with external (media, parents, diverse community groups including the opposition, agencies) and internal (staff, board, and student) publics.

- Exhibit a personal commitment to goal attainment, displaying professional behavior which may set a good example for subordinates and the community.

- Facilitate interpersonal and group interaction designed to allay common concerns, resolve problems, and improve attitudes relating to desegregation.

- Focus on creative arrangements and programs for meeting unmet needs, upgrading instruction, and articulating the expected outcomes of designs for instructional improvement and desegregation. *ET*

²¹ Kirby and others, p. 102.

²² Francis S. Chase, "The Regeneration of Public Education in Our Cities," *Phi Delta Kappan* 60 (January 1979): 353-56.

²³ Constanca Warren, "The Magnet School Boom: Implications for Desegregation," *Equal Opportunity Review* (New York: Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, Spring 1978).

²⁴ Beth Abramowitz, "Education, Income and Equality," *ISEP Monitor* (Washington: Institute for the Study of Educational Policy, February 1977).

²⁵ Robert Owens and Carol R. Steinhoff, *Administering Change in Schools* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1976), p. 126.

²⁶ Al Smith and others, *Achieving Effective Desegregation* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1973), pp. 68-69.

²⁷ Ben M. Harris, "Altering the Thrust of Supervision Through Creative Leadership," *Educational Leadership* 34 (May 1977): 567-71.

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