

Integration Irony

Supreme Court Ruling May Spur Segregation Of Some Dixie Schools

Whites Build Own Academies In Heavily Black Counties, Abandoning Public System

Scraping Up Tuition Money

By NEIL MAXWELL

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

DURANT, Miss. — The Supreme Court's order to end all school segregation immediately seems destined to have a dramatic—but ironic—impact here.

Both whites and Negroes here in Holmes County, where the suit leading to the High Court order originated, agree that the ruling will lead to less, not more, integration. They say it could even result in a completely segregated school system.

This outlook reflects the fact that Holmes County is more than 70% black. The outnumbered whites have grudgingly gone along with integration until now, but with the Federal Government trying to effect widespread integration, the prospect of white children attending predominantly black schools arises. And few here doubt the outcome: The whites will withdraw into an already flourishing private school system, abandoning the public schools to the blacks.

The Problem Districts

That may well be the initial result in many of the 250 or so Southern school districts where Negroes outnumber whites, both white and black observers agree. Holmes County forms one of these districts. But civil rights advocates, heartened by the Supreme Court ruling, say it should hasten integration in many of the more than 1,300 Southern districts where Negroes are in the minority.

"I think over the long haul we're going to get substantial gains from the ruling," says one veteran Southern civil rights worker. In time, this observer adds, "there's no reason the all-Negro schools in the hard-core districts can't be made into quality schools, and if that happens eventually the white children will come back to them."

Holmes County has presented special difficulties all along. In fact, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled last week that instead of ending segregation by Dec. 31, as most of the 32 other Mississippi school districts named in the Supreme Court ruling must do, Holmes County may do it in two steps, with the final one coming next September.

But when integration day comes to Durant, "the white students won't be there," Mayor C. H. Blanton Jr. says flatly. "A unitary system just won't work here. Would you send your children?" Such threats have been made before, of course—and not always carried out.

But many whites insist they're dead serious about avoiding real integration at all costs. Take John Henry Guess, a worker at a plastics plant here. "I ain't sending my kids to that nigger school; I'll keep them home," he says, standing on the front porch of his cramped, shabby home in a largely Negro neighborhood.

Mr. Guess may keep his three boys and two girls at home if he chooses, because the farsighted Mississippi legislature abolished the state compulsory attendance law after the Supreme Court outlawed segregated school systems in 1954. But sending the children to private schools would be a real problem, because tuition would run about \$400 a year apiece, and Mr. Guess earns less than \$5,000 a year.

White Countermeasures

Mississippi is trying to help people like Mr. Guess avoid integration. A few weeks ago the state legislature passed a law to provide money for tuition payments. However, a Federal court knocked down an earlier tuition grant law several months ago, and this law is under legal attack.

There is a strong feeling here that Durant's two public schools, as well as all the others in Holmes County, will be all black before long. A total white exodus already has produced this situation in the western half of the county, which is cotton-growing delta land with a high concentration of Negroes. The Department of Health, Education and Welfare has abandoned any hope of integrating the western part of the county; its plan assumes public schools there will remain all black.

White leaders here have laid plans to open a private school—the fourth in the county—with only the timing still undetermined. "I figure it will only take us a couple of months to get started," Mayor Blanton says. "We've got a building lined up and teachers lined up who are ready to leave the public schools when we need them."

Racial consciousness is obvious throughout Holmes County. The only cafe in Cruger, a hamlet of less than 500 in the western part of the county, still has six-inch-high "White" and "Colored" signs on the restroom doors, and Negroes are seldom seen at the lunch counters. The county phone book still identifies "colored" funeral homes. When integration first came to Holmes County four years ago, nearly half the white students fled to the instantly organized private schools, leaving behind a public school enrollment that is now 85% black.

Anticipating Failure

Both public schools in Durant now contain grades one through twelve. Under Durant's present system of limited integration, 160 Negroes have joined the 190 whites at the formerly all-white school; the second school remains all-black. Under the HEW plan for total integration next fall, the all-black school would be used for grades one through six; theoretically, it would have an enrollment of about 500 Negroes and 200 whites. The currently integrated school would be used for the remaining six grades and would have about 450 Negroes and 140 whites.

The projected white enrollment figures, however, assume the complete cooperation of all white parents in the district, even those who have already withdrawn their children from the public school system. In reality, public school officials expect almost no white parents to cooperate.

Pairing of the two schools and other drastic steps to eliminate the dual system don't have to be taken until September, but the interim

Please Turn to Page 32, Column 4

Integration Irony: Supreme Court Ruling May Spur Segregation

Continued From First Page

steps less than two months away don't promise to be easy. In stage one, the seventh and eighth grades at the Negro school are to move en masse to the integrated one, resulting in heavy concentrations of Negroes in those classes. Other county schools have a difficult path to follow in coming weeks, too. At Pickens, for example, roughly 40 white students of the enrollment of 100 whites must shift to a Negro school with 400 students. School officials predict all 40 of the whites will shift to private schools instead or drop out of school entirely.

Whites here have adapted surprisingly well to the integration of the formerly all-white school, but the idea of sending their children to the Negro school is something else. A white farmer who scrapes by raising soybeans says: "I'll keep my children in school so long as they can stay with their friends, but if they send them to the colored school, I'm pulling them out. I've got them in the third, fifth and eighth grades, and they can get by with that much education if they have to."

With other whites, too, the objections grow as the Negro percentage increases. Paul Tardy, editor of the Holmes County Herald, a weekly newspaper started a few years back by the white Citizens Council, sends his son to 10th grade at Lexington, Miss., high school, which is about 25% black. But if that level rises drastically, Mr. Tardy is convinced that teaching quality will drop and he vows he'll pull his son out.

To insure that the son will be able to get into the nearest private high school, about 20 miles away, "I'm trying to get \$100 ahead right now so I can go on and start paying his tuition," Mr. Tardy says. He plans to keep his son in public school until there is an overwhelming influx of Negroes, then shift to the private one.

There is wide agreement among local whites that the quality of teaching in the public schools will drop as the Negro pupils come in. For one thing, it already has been well-established here that when white students leave for the private schools, so do their teachers. When integration came to the white Lexington elementary school all but three of the 13 teachers there left for the new private schools, along with all the white pupils.

Losing Public Support

With the prospect of massive integration, "the white students will undoubtedly come out, the faculty will come out and public support will immediately be withdrawn," says a white leader. This does not mean whites could cut off school funds, since most of them come from the state on the basis of enrollment, but it does mean there might be solid white opposition to bond issue proposals.

Says Robert G. Clark of Holmes County, the only Negro to be elected to the state legislature since Reconstruction: "I think it's very likely we'll have an all-black system, and that will be bad as long as the whites control it. I expect they will try to make the system as rotten as they can."

It is difficult to judge the quality of the segregated private schools, although their backers insist that quality education is the reason for their existence. Many of the schools still lack adequate libraries, laboratory equipment and audio-visual aids. On the other hand, few seem to be suffering from a lack of qualified teachers; the teachers are coming from the public schools or out of retirement, if necessary.

The largest Holmes County private school, the Cruger-Tchula Academy, is housed in an abandoned public school building and in some new prefabricated buildings. Its classrooms are in good shape, and it offers a broad range of courses. Besides home economics and business, for example, advanced courses are offered in mathematics, science and foreign languages.

The school also has a lighted football field where the Colonels meet their opponents in the Academy Conference. A fleet of buses transports students.

Help From the Poverty Program

Another private school, Central Holmes Academy in Lexington, is housed in a shiny new metal-sided building that, according to an internal Office of Economic Opportunity memo, got a helping hand from the Federal poverty program. An OEO investigator visiting the county in 1966 to check on irregularities in the program wrote his boss: "... The most glaring discrepancy is this: Many of these men (in a training program to teach them to be auto mechanics) have been working on the white Citizens Council's private school. In other words, Federal funds are building the white Citizens Council school. How about that?" Both the president and the principal of Central Holmes Academy declined to be interviewed on any aspect of their school.)

There is little doubt that in some instances private schools are a legal, workable haven from integration. However, a suit currently in the courts seeks to knock out the tax deductibility the Internal Revenue Service now grants to contributions to such schools. Another suit is planned to try to make the state of Mississippi stop supplying textbooks to private schools.

Clearly, the popularity of private schools has risen dramatically in the South. The Southern Regional Council, which works to promote better race relations, estimates that 300,000 white students are attending what it calls "segregation academies" this year—perhaps 10 times more than there were five years ago.