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Private Schools: The Last Refuge

Now that the Supreme Court has decreed an immediate end to racial segregation in Southern public schools, many white resisters have only one place left to turn: private white "segregation academies." In recent years, the South has blossomed with more than 200 such schools, which are set up for the sole purpose of excluding blacks. According to one recent estimate, at least 300,000 white students out of 7,400,000 now attend segregated private schools in eleven Southern states. By all the evidence, the new academies will increase that total fast.

Few of them are quite so openly redneck as the Marvell Academy, a private elementary school that opened last year in two frame houses in the Arkansas Delta town of Marvell (pop. 1,916). Declared the school's founders, who are also members of the resurgent white Citizens' Council: "Integration is the corruption of the true American heritage by alien concept and ideology." More discreetly, most of the new private schools advertise "quality education," a slogan appealing to the genuine fear of many Southern whites that a massive influx of black students into formerly white public schools will slow down learning.

Narrow Curriculum. So it may, but meanwhile the segregation academies have had a hard time delivering "quality education." The problem is mainly a lack of money. Because few of the parents are wealthy, tuition fees must be kept modest (average: $300 a year). Attempts by Southern legislatures to help the segregation academies by providing state tuition grants have been struck down by federal courts. Thus the schools are now forced to live inadequately off tuition, plus whatever meager gifts they can attract.

As a result, the schools often use retired or uncertified teachers, who are almost always paid less than the going public school rate. The range of the curriculum tends to be narrow. Such semiessentials as labs, libraries and gymnasiums are frequently lacking. Accreditation is hard to come by, and graduates consequently face severely restricted choices in planning for higher education. On the whole, concluded a recent report by the Southern Regional Council, the segregation academies ironically offer the white pupil "an education that is not 'separate but equal,' but separate and inferior."

Nice Plant. The haste in which most segregation academies are conceived and born hardly helps. Typical is

the new Sandy Run Academy in Swansea, S.C., a rural town whose population of 1,800 is 40% black. Until a year ago, Swansea had escaped all but token integration. But when the school board finally bowed to federal court orders to integrate Grades 10, 11 and 12, Swansea parents boycotted the public school. When the boycott petered out after two weeks, its instigators rushed ahead with plans to start a private high school.

One white citizen—himself a member of the public board of education—donated five acres of land outside town. Twenty others put up $2,000 each to buy materials. Townspeople donated their labor. Construction began last May, and just 31 months later Sandy Run Academy's attractive, one-story brick building was finished. The school is what educators call "a nice plant": its seven classrooms are clean, well lighted and centrally air-conditioned. It also has a number of shortcomings. In a community that sends only 30% of its students to college, Sandy Run offers a rudimentary college-preparatory program (English, history, science, mathematics, French), but no vocational training. There is no gymnasium or athletic field, no cafeteria, and little audiovisual equipment. The auditorium has no stage. Library bookshelves are mostly empty. There are cheerleaders—but no teams to cheer.

Love of Learning. Sandy Run Academy opened this fall, and immediately added primary grades by merging with a private elementary school in nearby Gaston. The merged schools have 150 students, all white, of course, and almost all from Lexington County. They pay $300 a year tuition, plus $25 for books, and another $25 for miscellaneous expenses such as testing.

Since tuition alone cannot pay the bills at Sandy Run, the difference is being made up through contributions, solicitation by teachers and benefit parties—such as the "Harvest Carnival" recently staged by the Ladies Auxiliary, which netted the school $500. Sandy Run's eleven teachers are paid a maximum of $5,000 a year, compared with $7,300 in the public schools. All are college graduates, though several lack required credits for teaching in public schools. Headmaster William Jackson, 54, a retired public school teacher, insists that he and his staff are motivated by simple love of learning. "We're not concerned with integration, de-integration, or whatever," he declares. "We're concerned with quality education." More frankly, Burton Gunter, a plainspoken Swansea farmer who sits on the county board of education, says that segregation academies are "going to take over everywhere," because "integration is ruining education—it's one of the worst things that ever hit this country, worse than a tornado."

Teaching Prejudice. The growth of Southern segregation academies poses two distinct dangers. One is to the students who attend them. Pointing out that many of the teachers are segregationists who fled jobs in public schools to escape integration, the Southern Regional Council warns: "Their potential danger to the minds of children is enhanced because many of these schools at least tacitly approve of their prejudices." Often the approval is more than tacit: several segregation academies in South Carolina honor their graduates with diplomas and "survivor pins," which show a Confederate flag with the word survivor engraved across it.

The other danger is to the public schools. The fear is that, as white parents continue withdrawing their children to private schools, they will become increasingly reluctant to vote bond issues and taxes for the South's public schools, which already receive less support than the schools of any other region. One ironic

result: poor whites who cannot afford private schools may get a worse education.

Robert G. English, Swansea's 35-year-old public school superintendent, expects eventually to combat the threat of private schools in his district through widespread use of federal funds, particularly for remedial reading and special classes for slow learners. That way, he hopes, newly integrated black children will be able to catch up to the norm without holding up the education of better-prepared whites. "If we can show white parents that this massive integration can work without damaging their children's education," says English, "I think the public school will come out strong." That is a very big if.