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Southern Regional Council
5 Forsyth Street, N.W.
Atlanta 3, Georgia

THE HARD OR THE EASY WAY?

In Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas there are 147 counties which have a Negro population of five per cent or less. Florida and Mississippi have only one county each, and Tennessee with 52 has the largest number. These counties of small Negro population are mainly located in the Appalachian mountain chain or, as in the case of Arkansas, in the Ozark mountains. Of the 147, there are 18 which have no Negroes living within their boundaries; of the remaining 129 there are 31 which have a Negro population of less than one per cent.

Schools have been desegregated in only 13 of the 129 counties where there are Negroes. Three of these are in Virginia, where two county systems, Floyd and Grayson, desegregated on court order; another, Fairfax, was desegregated when Negro pupils were assigned to previously all-white schools by the State Pupil Placement Board. In North Carolina, there is one, Yancey County, which also has the dubious distinction of being the first school district of that state to have been desegregated under court order. In Tennessee, the Anderson County system desegregated by court order; Washington County in August, 1961 announced a policy of non-segregation, but as yet no "eligible" Negroes have applied for entrance to white schools. The city system of Kingsport (in Sullivan County) has desegregated voluntarily, as has the city system of Elizabethton (in Carter County), which has also had no applicants since its change of policy. The county schools of both Sullivan and Carter remain segregated. This pattern also appears in Arkansas, where the city systems of Charleston, Fayetteville, Hoxie, and Bentonville desegregated voluntarily, and that of Van Buren under court order; these places are located in, respectively, Franklin, Washington, Lawrence, Benton, and Crawford counties, and in each case the county system continues segregated.

In summary, out of 129 counties six county systems and seven city systems have desegregated; of the 13 systems, seven have desegregated voluntarily, five by court order, and one under a pupil placement plan. There are 116 counties which still maintain a dual school system.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision left to individual school systems no choice in regard to the inevitability of desegregation; it did leave to the schools considerable freedom to make their own choice of how this ruling should be implemented. What happens, however, when a system chooses to fight the Court's decision is dramatically illustrated by the experience of Yancey County, North Carolina.

Yancey County's population of 14,008 includes 140 Negroes; in a school population of 4,000, there are 30 Negro children. Before 1958 there was no school at all for Negro children of high school age, and a two-room clapboard, cinder block building with no inside plumbing for elementary age children. Negro high school students were sent to Asheville, a round trip of 80 miles, for their education.

In the summer of 1958 two events occurred, which were to have both local and national repercussions: The county went heavily into debt to complete two new high schools for white pupils; and the Negro elementary school was condemned, and ordered closed by the State Board of Education. Upon the promise of the Yancey County School Board that a new elementary school would be built for their children, Negro parents permitted the children to make the daily 80-mile round trip to Asheville for the 1958-1959 school year.

But for reasons financial and political the county failed to keep its promise to build the new Negro school, and the Negro children were again assigned to the Asheville schools for the 1959-1960 school year. The Negro parents refused to accept this order and boycotted the Asheville bus. Education was provided for the elementary children through the help of the Burnsville Education Project, an organization of volunteers, the majority of whom lived in Asheville, which set up a makeshift private school in a Negro church near Burnsville, with 27 students in attendance. The seven Negro high school students were boarded in a private Methodist school in Asheville.

The first of the court cases to solve the impasse was filed on November 11, 1959. While the case was still pending, the Board of Education voted, in late 1959, to build the new Negro school in Burnsville. In the Spring of 1960, the State Board loaned the county \$30,000 with which to construct the building. In spite of a taxpayer's suit to restrain the county from proceeding with construction, the new school was completed in August, 1960. When school opened for the 1960-1961 term, only four Negro children registered for classes.

The other children, 17 elementary and eight high school pupils, turned again to the Burnsville Education Project for help, and classes were once again set up in the Burnsville church. On September 13, 1960 a federal court judge ordered the Board to admit the high school students to the white high schools and to assign the elementary pupils either to the Negro elementary school or to one of the other schools in the county. The eight high school students began attending the white high schools (without incident or friction), and the elementary children were assigned to the new Negro school.

In August, 1961 Negro parents renewed their efforts to have their elementary school children admitted to the white schools.

There were the very real fears on the part of the parents that the elementary school would become a union school (i.e., one with grades one to 12) or, if it remained elementary, that the 17 students currently assigned there would not be a sufficient number to allow the State Board to assign more than one teacher for the eight grades. However, applications for admission to white schools were denied, and the children were once again assigned to the Negro elementary school. The parents plan an appeal to the Board, and, if again denied, will take the matter back into the federal district court.

For all involved in Yancey's dilemma the experience has been an expensive one. The costs in the court cases are difficult to determine. The Burnsville Education Project raised and spent around \$6,500. The actual cost of the new Negro school (to house 17 pupils) has been \$45,000; tuition and bus expenses to the county and state in sending the Negro children to Asheville amounted to approximately \$3,000. Thus, a conservative estimate would indicate that the total cost, so far, to the county and state alone is in the neighborhood of \$50,000.

The Winston-Salem Journal in a cogent editorial on August 10, 1961 clearly stated the question which must be answered by Yancey County--and by the other counties of the South which, like Yancey, have but a few Negro residents.

Not a Question of Numbers

In September, 1960, after a prolonged and bitter controversy, Yancey County's two high schools were desegregated by federal court order. Now an effort is under way to desegregate the county's elementary schools.

Last Monday night the Yancey County Board of Education refused to approve requests that four Negro children be assigned to the previously all white Burnsville elementary school. In all probability, this decision will result in further litigation in federal court.

Yancey County is typical of many of our mountain counties in that its desegregation problem results from public atti-

tudes and not from numbers. The county has a total population of just over 14,000. Of these, less than 150 are Negroes. Of the 4,000 youngsters in Yancey County schools, only about 30 are Negroes.

Much the same sort of thing exists in other mountain counties.

There are no Negro schools in Clay or Mitchell counties. Alleghany, Madison and Transylvania have elementary schools for Negroes but no high schools.

In these counties, therefore, at least some of the Negro children are being sent to school in other counties - if, indeed, they are receiving any

education at all.

That is the same pattern that triggered the court action in Yancey County. Negro children were being sent to Asheville, a round-trip of 80 miles, for their education.

The Yancey County decision makes it plain that the federal courts will not tolerate such an arrangement.

In such counties, logic would indicate that a graceful acceptance of desegregation would be the course of wisdom. For in these counties numbers are no problem. The Negro children make up less than one per cent of the school age population. Moreover, in the light of the Yancey County decision, fighting desegregation can lead to only two results: (1) piling heavy costs on the backs of counties which cannot afford these costs and (2) certain defeat when the matter is decided in federal court.

In its fight to keep eight Negroes out of two high schools with a combined enrollment of more than 1,000, Yancey County spent almost \$70,000.

The county lost that fight. Now it appears that Yancey County is prepared to go to court and fight again - this time to keep 17 Negro children out of elementary schools

which have a combined enrollment of about 3,000.

There is no logic in this pattern. But, then, logic rarely has a place in race relations.

In Yancey County the attitude has been, "We'll fight until the federal court tells us we're whipped. Then we'll accept the court's order." And that occurred in Yancey. Once the court handed down its decision, the people of the county accepted it and the desegregation of the county's two high schools proceeded without friction or incident.

It can be hoped that Yancey County will adopt this same attitude now that the question of desegregating the elementary schools is headed into the courts.

In North Carolina Yancey provides a guide for other mountain counties with minimal Negro populations and inadequate or non-existent Negro school facilities. In these counties, where the number of Negro children presents no real problem, the question must be, "What price are we willing to pay to try to maintain the traditional attitudes?"

The Yancey County story indicates that the price tag is high, and it buys only a little time.