

AN OPEN LETTER FROM REPRESENTATIVES OF THE FORREST CITY (ARKANSAS) MOVEMENT

Approximately two weeks before school was to start a group of Lincoln High students assembled at Forrest City Freedom Center to discuss the development of a group to represent students and seek changes in the school. Out of this first meeting came the Students for Action Committee (S.A.C.). Officers were elected and the group was set up to function in a democratic way. Many S.A.C. members had previously been involved in the civil rights demonstrations of summer 1965 in Forrest City.

In the days immediately following this first meeting the idea grew among the students to develop a petition listing our specific suggestions for the improvement of school conditions. The petition was to be circulated among the whole student body for their approval and signatures and then presented to the school principal for his consideration. Over 1000 students supported the petition and signed it on the first two days it was circulated. In addition, a number of parents took it upon themselves to develop an informal parents committee to support the students. These parents went out into the community and gathered signatures of about 500 parents on the petition. On Tuesday, September 1st, the second official day of classes, we the S.A.C. students, presented our petition to Mr. C. T. Cobb, the Negro principal of Lincoln High, and spent the remainder of the day discussing our suggestions with him. Mr. Cobb admitted that many of the students' suggestions were fair and require serious consideration.

The petition has sixteen demands and is reproduced below:

1. No male instructor for girls' physical education classes.
2. Teachers at Lincoln High school show a complete lack of concern for students who are slow at grasping the material than others. We want to initiate a program in which students will advance according to their comprehension.
3. Put an end to students working in the counselor's office. Students should not have access to the records of other students. If the counselor needs help, someone should be hired to help.
4. More cooperation out of the counselor. Students tell the present counselor their problems and complaints. The present counselor then breaks this confidence by telling teachers what the students say. This is a breach of professional ethics. We demand the placement of a new counselor who has been trained in counseling students.
5. Put an end to teachers using profanity to students. If teachers continue this practice, we demand their dismissal.
6. Elimination of unnecessary fund drives. We demand to have an accounting of all fees that are gotten from the students, and also what happens to the money that is collected from the students.
7. An organized library program. The school board must immediately send for a representative of the accrediting association to tell the school what it needs to add to have an adequate library.
8. Elimination of unnecessary activities during class hours.
9. Immediate accreditation by the North Central Association.
10. A drama instructor.
11. A school nurse who will be qualified to give dental, eye, and ear exams. Some students do not even have small pox vaccinations.
12. Busses to carry students to school who live on the outskirts of town.
13. The school board and the Lincoln School administration should meet monthly with representatives of the Student Action Council.
14. Free textbooks for all students.
15. Free lunches for all students who are not able to pay.

16. Complete integration of the student body, faculties, and school busses of all schools in Forrest City school system. We demand the institution of the Princeton Plan to facilitate school integration. If this is not immediately possible, we demand that registration be opened for the "Freedom of Choice" plan for this present term.

The next day S.A.C. officers and students again talked with Mr. Cobb. His attitude was markedly different from the day before. Mr. Cobb reversed himself completely and flatly refused to consider any of our suggestions. He forbid the circulation of any material pertaining to the petition on campus.

The S.A.C. Officers and the remainder of Lincoln students returned quietly to their classes for the next few days.

Meanwhile the parents committee gathered strength and the following week a delegation of seventeen mothers and fathers went to speak with Mr. Cobb. Mr. Cobb made arrangements for the parents to talk with Mr. Irving, the white school superintendent in Forrest City. Nothing else was accomplished at this meeting and both sides parted angrily.

The following Monday, September 13, the parents were permitted to speak to Mr. Irving, white superintendent of Forrest City Special School District #7. When they entered his office they found they were also confronted by other school officials. Mr. Irving harassed the mothers and fathers who attended this conference in a harsh and shocking manner. Showing utter disrespect for them and complete disregard for their petition, he all of a sudden said, "I have to go to another meeting," and ended the conference. However, before ending the meeting, he threatened that further action on their part would result in hardship for their children.

Only after this two-week period of petitioning, discussions and conferences did the majority of the students realize that they could get no action from the authorities by using formal channels. The parents also resented the harsh and inconsiderate treatment that they had received when they petitioned the school authorities. Because these two weeks of conferences with the school officials were so frustrating and because S.A.C. students felt compelled to continue their campaign for improved school conditions, we had only the alternative of a school boycott. This boycott would be a frank testimonial to the inadequacies of the education we received at Lincoln High School.

On Thursday, September 16, we initiated our school boycott by staging a sit-in in the corridor of the Negro Lincoln High School at 8 a.m. Twenty students were involved. We were approached by Mr. Cobb, the Negro school principal, who tried to get us to go to our classes. However, we refused to do so. About fifteen minutes later, Mr. Irving, the white school superintendent arrived, accompanied by Mr. James DeRossit, president of the school board, Mr. DeWitt Smith, assistant superintendent of schools, and seven local policemen. We were told by the police that we would have to leave the corridor. We got up and started to walk toward the entrance to the school but when we reached the door we were confronted by one of the local policemen who stood in the door. He refused to let us out. He was told by one of the school officials to let us out.

We then went outside of the school and began marching around the school singing freedom songs. As we walked around the school, our group began to grow -- pretty soon we had 150 students marching with us. We were later approached by school officials once again and told that we would have to leave the school campus. We then marched over to a road at the back of the campus, grouped to gather, and continued singing. Once again, we were approached by school officials and police who tried to make us stop singing. But we would not stop. At about this time, a small number of concerned parents joined us. One of these was Mrs. L. C. Bradley, a Negro candidate for the school board. Then one of the school officials began pointing out certain students in the group that he considered leaders and said that he wanted to talk with them and to come inside. At the same time, one of the girls in our group was taken to a police car and told to get inside. Then, all the students gathered around the car and said that if they were going to arrest her they would have to arrest all of us. No arrests were made.

While representatives of our group were inside talking to school officials, the rest of the group remained outside. When our representatives came out, they said they were dissatisfied with what was discussed during this small conference. The white school officials kept saying that people should go back to the school and that they would do what they could to meet the demands but that the students had to

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realize that this "takes time." We then returned to the freedom center to discuss further action in order that our demands would be met.

On Friday morning September 17, we returned to Lincoln High School and picketed. Around 200 students were involved. After an hour of picketing we decided to march down to the white high school to discuss our demands with Mr. Irving. When we arrived at Forrest City High School Mr. Irving came outside and told us to leave. We told him we wanted to discuss our demands. He became rather furious and once again told us to leave because we were disturbing classes. About ten minutes later a fleet of about thirty state patrol cars pulled up. Mr. Irving threatened us with arrest if we did not leave. We refused to leave. He motioned to the police and said "ok, get them." We were then arrested and taken by school busses to the St. Francis County jail. A number of Negro bystanders were arrested with us. Some of us were packed 40-50 deep in county jail cells -- cells which usually hold 30 people. Others of us were sent to the condemned city jail.

Meanwhile, five policemen went to the SNCC Freedom Center and arrested SNCC worker Tex Lowe. That same afternoon trials began for the 198 students and 8 adults. S.A.C. members had not had time to get lawyers; therefore most of the students were charged with disturbing the peace on public school property. They were found guilty, sentenced to 30 days in jail and fined \$250.00. Those who the police considered "leaders" were sentenced to 60 days in jail and fined \$300 - \$500. Tex Lowe was charged with disturbing the peace on school property (even though he was not at the demonstration) and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. His sentence was six months for the disturbing the peace charge and one year for the contributing charge. He was tried even though he asked for a continuance until he could get a lawyer.

Some of us were returned to the jail cells after the trial; others were sent to the white swimming pool and the white civic center which served as temporary jail quarters.

About 6 p.m. that same day (September 17) Jerry Casey, SNCC project director and Pat Gladman, a volunteer from Canada, were arrested and charged with "Contributing to the delinquency of minors."

Saturday, September 18, a new group of students marched to the jail to protest the arrests of their schoolmates. No arrests were made. Also on Saturday, Tex Lowe and nine other students were taken to the Mississippi County Penal Farm.

By late Saturday afternoon all those previously arrested, except the ten at the Penal Farm, had been released on bond. On Sunday, those at the Penal Farm were released.

On Sunday night, September 19, Dr Evans, a Negro representative from Gov. Faubus' office in Little Rock, came to meet with the students. He listened to the students' demands and said he would arrange a meeting with the school officials. We held off demonstrations for Monday because Evans said he would get this meeting arranged. We said we wouldn't wait longer than 11 am Tuesday for these negotiations. Finally the meeting was scheduled for 11 am Tuesday. Student representatives, Mervin Barr, President of the St. Francis County Achievement Committee, two SNCC workers, Jerry Casey and Tex Lowe, Candidate Bradley, and a Negro parent Mrs Brown met with Mr DeRossit, School Board President, Dr Evans and others.

They looked over the petition which now included a demand that all charges be dropped against those arrested. Some of our demands, they said, would receive immediate attention; others could not be rectified until they received their money under the new Elementary and Secondary Education Act. But they avoided discussion of our two most important points -- that the charges be dropped and that the school system be fully desegregated immediately. They said that they could not drop the charges but that the courts would have to do this. They also argued that since their school desegregation plan had been accepted by the Office of Education, they could not open registration or change the way desegregation had been going. But we knew that they had not carried out the plan in good faith. They had re-routed the school busses so that Negro students in the rural areas transferring to white schools would have two extra miles to catch the school bus. They had also held the registration period before the Office of Education accepted the plan. In May, forms were passed out in school which parents had to bring back in 48 hours if they wanted to transfer their children to white schools.

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In addition, the Negro principal had openly discouraged students from transferring: he told seniors that they might not graduate if they changed to the white school. He told other students that if they were expelled from or left the white school for any reason that they wouldn't be able to get back in the Negro school. There was only a little publicity about the fact that the white schools would be desegregated.

After explaining what demands they would act upon, the school officials pulled out a previously prepared typewritten page listing those things they would accept. They then said they would issue this to the press once the meeting was ended. But the student representatives said they would have to take the recommendations of the school board back to their group.

At a community mass meeting that night (Tuesday), the people and students rejected the school board's proposal because the two most important demands had not been met. During the mass meeting the two Negro policemen came to the door, took Jerry Casey, SNCC project director, outside, and arrested him for "threatening to do bodily harm" to one of the students who had been in the first demonstration. The warrant for Jerry's arrest was supposedly sworn out by the student's aunt. During the time Jerry was supposed to have threatened this student he was down at the bank involved in negotiations.

On Wednesday, September 22, the students demonstrated at the county courthouse. All were arrested for "parading without a permit." That evening Mrs. L.C. Bradley and Mrs. Brown were arrested at their homes for "inciting to riot." Jerry Casey, then in jail, was also charged with "inciting to riot."

On Thursday, September 23, more students and parents demonstrated at the courthouse. When they arrived they were told to leave or they would be arrested. About two-thirds of this group were arrested, and charged with "parading without a permit."

The same "jails" were used for the one hundred or more people arrested Wednesday and Thursday. No trials have been held yet; people were bonded out by Saturday.

During these two weeks of demonstrations, 90% of the students at Lincoln High School stayed out of school. But gradually some parents began taking students back to school. This was partially due to the fact that when students were released from jail on their own recognizance, parents promised the officials that the students would return to school. Students who did not return to school were those who refused to return until conditions were bettered and the Negro principal removed.

We are here in Washington to present our petition to the Office of Education and the Justice Department. We are asking that these government officials take all actions possible to remedy the situation. We will present specific demands to each agency when we meet with them on Monday.

FORREST CITY, ARKANSAS 1965