

SRC calls for a "shift from paternalism to democracy"

Representation For All

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DISCRIMINATIONS long taken for granted in the South are today yielding their bitter harvest. The Southern states are discovering that equal opportunity—as defined not only in the U. S. Constitution, but also in their own laws and constitutions—is expensive and difficult of achievement. They are learning just how unequal our "separate but equal" facilities are, in health, education, housing, recreation, and scores of other public services. Under the pressure of court action, they are discovering that the time is rapidly running out when postponement and token approaches to equalization will suffice.

The problem is talked about in terms of dollars and cents; repairing the neglect of generations is a costly business. But, as the Southern Regional Council has repeatedly pointed out, the problem is a material one—and something more. The South has an old unpaid debt to its Negro citizens: to reward patience, service, and loyalty with recognition of full citizenship status. This debt will not be satisfied merely by *bestowing* upon the Negro population increased benefits long overdue (although that is an end far from attainment).

As Dr. Benjamin Mays declared recently in *New South*: "There is a growing conviction among Negroes that if one racial group makes all the laws and administers them, holds all the power and administers it, and has all the public money and distributes it, it is too much to expect that group to deal as fairly with the weak, minority, non-participating group as it deals with its own."

What is needed is a shift from paternalism to democracy. Negroes should have full and fair representation on policy-making and administrative bodies. These would include, of course, boards and commissions governing the whole range of public services. But the need today is of special urgency in the field of education.

In county after county over the South, Federal courts have ruled, or are being asked to rule, that equal school facilities must be provided for Negro children without delay. School boards and other public officials are anxiously examining their budgets and making belated starts at improvement. A few politicians, more interested in votes than in progress, are shouting defiance at the courts and seeking to incite the public to anger. Other spokesmen have taken on the futile task of justifying and explaining away the inequalities which are too plain to be denied. Still others, while deploring existing discriminations, deplore even more the filing of law suits demanding correction.

Such protestations are neither justified nor constructive. In view of the long record of evasion and inaction, it is hardly surprising that Negroes are turning with increasing frequency to the courts for the remedy to old injustices. That

is a lawful and accepted procedure in our democracy, and should not cause dismay or indignation. On the contrary, it should cause some honest self-examination. School suits, by and large, are the fruits of bad faith. There is every reason to believe that the Negro plaintiffs, like the defendants, would prefer a less expensive and more cooperative method of reaching agreement. The best way to achieve that is for Negroes to have a voice in the policy-making which determines the quality of education children are to receive.

Much attention is being focused just now on the attainment of two equal school systems. Who is to say what is equal? In past experience, our only arbiter on that is the courts. And the briefs prepared for the courts by contending parties inevitably stress the mathematics of equality: How many desks, of what model, at what cost, on how many square feet of floor space, for how many white pupils, as compared with how many of each of these for how many Negro pupils? And ultimately, a court must state a formula—a number.

However, true equality is not static arithmetic. It is a running matter. It requires trustworthy day-to-day administration. How can they be contrived? The only answer is representation of all parties on the important policy boards. If we are to have flexibility and order and understanding in the conduct of our school system in the South, we must build a system of school administration which all concerned can believe in.

In places where boards of education are elective rather than appointive, it is up to qualified Negro persons to seek the office. It need hardly be pointed out that no representation can be effective unless it honestly expresses the feelings of the group represented. In places where boards of education are appointive, public officials will be tempted to appoint persons whose compliance and readiness to please would make for easy agreement. But such appointments will not accomplish their purpose. True agreement—particularly in a matter as sensitive and important as education opportunity—can be reached only if the minority view is voiced with frankness and considered with respect.

The opportunity is before us to strengthen our region and hasten its progress by admitting all our people to the ranks of our common citizenship. There could be no more appropriate time than now, and no more appropriate field than education, for that step to be taken.