

"Justice and Equality for All"

November 1954

WE, a group of Negro educators, representing fourteen Southern States and the District of Columbia, have assembled here in Hot Springs, Arkansas, to express our collective point of view with respect to the Supreme Court's decision, May 17, 1954, declaring segregation in the public schools unconstitutional. We believe that by virtue of the position which we occupy in American life, we are obligated to express our views.

We welcome the decision and look upon it as another milestone in the nation's quest for a democratic way of life and in the Negro's long struggle to become a first class citizen.

The Supreme Court's decision is a part of an evolutionary process which has been going on in the South and in the Nation for a long time. The decision was not a sudden leap out of the American tradition. It was the right and moral thing to do. Moreover, it was a next logical and inevitable step in the context of our democratic development. The movement toward full democracy has resulted in the abolition of segregation in interstate travel, equalization of teachers' salaries in most areas in the South, the matriculation of Negroes in Southern universities, and the integration of Negroes and whites in all of the armed forces.

We hail the decision again because it dramatically distinguishes our way of life in a democracy from that in such totalitarian countries as Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. Here in the United States great social wrongs can be and are righted without bloodshed and without revolutionary means . . . because we have a Constitution which guarantees equality and justice to all and a body of citizens who are committed to the ideal of human brotherhood.

The Constitution is our sovereign authority. To evade or discredit it is to destroy our government. Negro Americans have never given way to despair nor have they sought relief from injustices by following after the false promises of Communism. Their past accomplishments and their planned hopes for the future lie in the American ideal—"justice and equality for all." We take pride in the fact that every individual and organizational effort we have made to achieve complete citizenship rights in American life has been within the legal framework of the Federal Constitution. The preamble of the Constitution and the ideals and principles of Negro citizenship have been identical. We have never had to apologize for unwillingness or inability to adopt or support its principles.

The Supreme Court was not dealing solely with a local issue or with the issue of whether Negro and white children should attend the same public school. World leadership has been thrust upon the United States. It became America's responsibility before and after World War II not only to fight against racism and aggres-

sion, but to defend democracy in the free world. America's leadership in the world and not alone the citizenship of fifteen million Negroes was at stake. The Nation cannot consistently stand as leader of the democratic forces of the world and harbor the undemocratic practice of racial segregation at home.

Southern people have accepted previous decisions of the Supreme Court and the social changes resulting therefrom, such decisions as the abolition of the white primary, and the admission of Negroes to white universities. We believe that the South will likewise accept the decision of May 17. We gladly note that integration in public schools involving both students and teachers is already working well in some schools in the South. We are heartened by the expressions of the Southern Press speaking favorably of the decision, and by the fact that several church bodies and a number of church men and women in the South are on record as approving it.

Even before the Supreme Court handed down this decision, some Southern educational institutions, Protestant and Catholic, public and private, had opened their doors to Negroes. It is our hope that all of the colleges and universities of the South, Negro and white, will immediately implement the spirit of the Court's decision by accepting, irrespective of race, all qualified students who seek admission.

It is most unfortunate that preoccupation with the co-educational implication of the decision has obscured the question of the quality of education for all children. In two-thirds of the United States, co-education of the races has been going on for many decades with no untoward effect. There need be no ill effect in the South.

The effort on the part of some leaders and some school officials to intimidate Negro teachers and other citizens under threat of loss of jobs if they express approval of the Court's decision and if segregation is not maintained is short-sighted, vindictive, and contrary to the fundamental sense of fair play of the American people.

Negro educators should not and cannot afford to be a party to any plan designed to nullify the Court's decision. To do this would be tantamount to sharing in a plan to destroy the very fabric of our Constitutional Government. We regret that some public officials have sought to persuade Negro educators and other leaders to evade the decision by agreeing to voluntary segregation. This cannot be decently done; and such persons who agree to this will not be respected even by the officials seeking such commitment or compromise of principle.

Good statesmanship in a democracy requires that all segments of the population participate in the implementation of the Court's decision, which is of common concern. The idea is still too prevalent that the issues involved can be resolved without Negro participation. Some public officials speak as if only white Americans are involved. We are all, Negro and white, deeply and equally involved. Many Negroes can contribute sound, intelligent, and statesmanlike techniques for the handling of the inevitable issues. Negroes are able and willing to serve on boards of education, on other policy-making bodies, and in administrative capacities throughout the South. They are anxious to share the responsibilities which in too many instances have been monopolized by one segment of the population.

We urge that immediate steps be taken to implement the decision. We are aware of the fact that it will be more difficult in some places than in others and that the time span of implementation may vary. However, there should be the cooperative effort in every community to plan on the local level the implementation of the decision. But the planning should be done in good faith and with an honest desire to implement the decision rather than scheming to circumvent it.

The action of adults who incite students to riot or encourage them to demonstrate in opposition to unsegregated schools is to be strongly condemned. Negro and white children have played together in the South for decades upon decades. They have no innate antipathy toward each other.

The Court's decision makes possible a single school system with the opportunity for the people in the region to marshal their educational resources and to develop a philosophy that brings to education generally a new perspective, and to the nation a new spirit. This cannot be done in a dual system of education. Let it be clearly understood that we are not pleading for Negroes alone. We are concerned about the best education that can be made available to every child in the South. In our concern for equal and improved educational opportunities for every Southern child, we do not overlook the strenuous economic effort required. We are aware of the South's responsibility for providing funds needed to raise the level of educational opportunity for every Southern child. We, therefore, strongly endorse and support federal aid to education in order that the per capita expenditure in the South may be brought up to a high national average.

We want the white child to have the best and we want the Negro child to have the best. It is the opinion of the Supreme Court that there cannot be equality of educational opportunity for the Negro child in a segregated system. Moreover, it is the opinion of the social scientists that it is not possible for the white child to receive the best education in a segregated system.

Ours is a common democracy in which the weakest and the strongest, the most privileged and the most disadvantaged, the descendants of every race and every nation can share and happily boast that we are proud to be Americans. Children educated from the beginning in such a system will insure for us all a future of which we can be as proud as of the abolition of slavery and child labor, woman suffrage, equal educational opportunities for women, and the institution of the public schools themselves.

Time will prove that our fears have no foundation in fact just as has been proved by the implementation of previous Court decisions. Segregation breeds fear; and when the barriers of segregation are at last removed from American life, we will wonder why we feared at all. We, therefore, call upon the people of the South and the Nation to strive with good will and honest intent to implement the Court's decision. It is our firm and unanimous belief that the implementation of the decision will strengthen the South and the Nation morally, economically, and spiritually. We as Negro citizens stand ready to cooperate wholeheartedly in the progressive fulfillment of these democratic objectives.