

# DESEGREGATION AT WORK

## Progress and Problems . . . by *Henry Lee Moon*

FOUR months after the United States Supreme Court handed down its historic decision on segregation in the public schools four major cities and more than two-score smaller cities and towns in seven states had begun the process of integrating their formerly segregated school systems. The success of most of these communities in effecting a peaceful transition has been largely obscured by the publicity given to the few instances in which resistance to the change has been expressed in demonstrations of defiance.

In four of the six communities direct-

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ly involved in the cases argued before the Supreme Court, Negro and white children were attending classes together by the opening of the school year in September. The two Delaware school districts had lowered the color bar two years earlier in compliance with a ruling of the state Supreme Court. In September, 1953, eight months before the federal court's May 17 ruling, the Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education had voted "to terminate segregation in the elementary grades as rapidly as practicable." The District of Columbia Board of Education promptly adopted a policy statement disavowing racial considerations in the operation of the school system. Then, on May 25, a plan developed by Superintendent Hobart M. Corning called for initiation of desegregation in September, 1954, and completion by

September, 1955. Opposed to this plan as a needlessly gradualist approach were Mrs. Margaret Just Butcher, one of the three Negro members of the board, and the Washington branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Mrs. Butcher and the N. A. A. C. P. asked for immediate desegregation. The school boards in the other two cases, Clarendon County, South Carolina, and Prince Edward County, Virginia, have taken no steps to comply with the court's ruling.

In addition to Washington, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Kansas City, Missouri, various cities, towns, and rural areas in Arkansas, Delaware, West Virginia, Missouri, Kansas, and New Mexico have initiated desegregation as a result of the decision, and many have successfully completed it. Nine of the

eleven cities in Kansas which were permitted to segregate have proceeded to integrate. In Missouri 110 of the 177 school districts reporting Negro school children have opened previously "white" schools to Negro pupils. Of the 44 West Virginia counties having Negro school-age children, 12 have completely integrated their public-school systems and 13 others have partially integrated. The May 17 decision sounded the death knell to Jim Crow schools in New Mexico and Arizona, in both of which states, as in Kansas and Wyoming, public-school segregation had been permissive. Wyoming, apparently, had never set up separate schools for the children of its small Negro population.

THE encouraging aspect of these desegregation moves is that they were essentially voluntary actions by the communities. In handing down the decision that segregation in public-school education was unconstitutional the court withheld formulation of decrees calling for further argument on how and when to require compliance. The new hearing, originally set for the week of December 6, has been postponed pending Senate confirmation of the President's nominee to fill the vacancy created by the death of Justice Jackson. In the strongholds of racial bias, mostly in the deep South, school authorities have assumed that no action is required until the court hands down its decrees. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, whose lawyers, headed by Thurgood Marshall, argued the cases in the courts, maintains that any local school board is free to desegregate immediately, state constitutions and statutes requiring segregation notwithstanding. In midsummer Attorney General John M. Dalton of Missouri announced that the decision voided all state constitutional and statutory requirements for segregation, thus leaving the local educational authorities free to integrate if they chose. He added, however, that they could not be required to act until the Supreme Court issued its decrees. Nevertheless, Missouri school districts accounting for 75 per cent of the state's Negro school children began integration without waiting for further court action.

While the vast majority of Negro children who had been attending Jim Crow schools before May 17 are still en-

rolled in them, the new democratic pattern in education has been accepted in many areas where segregation was previously required or permitted under state constitutions and laws. Although not



Berger

### Thurgood Marshall

subject to the court's ruling, Roman Catholic parochial schools—and to a lesser extent the schools of other denominations—have begun desegregation in Arkansas, Missouri, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, Texas, and Tennessee.

In general, white pupils have welcomed incoming Negro pupils. Negro athletes have made the teams in the high schools to which they have been admitted in Baltimore, West Virginia, and Missouri. Negroes have been elected to class offices in schools from which they were formerly excluded. Negro and white students are participating jointly in dramatics and debating as well as in sports. In Jackson, Missouri, a town of 3,700, "integration has been complete in both academic and sports fields," reports the superintendent of schools, R. O. Hawkins. "One of the varsity football players is colored, one substitute is colored, and the junior-high team has five colored players on the squad." The extent of voluntary desegregation by public and private schools and of the pupils' acceptance of the new pattern leads me to believe that harmonious integration of the entire American public-school system may be attained within the next year or two.

However, the Southern Education Reporting Service, established by the Ford Foundation to compile and publish information on the progress of desegrega-

tion, reports organized protests and demonstrations against integration in Sheridan, Arkansas; Clarkton, Missouri; Hobbs, New Mexico; Milford, Delaware; Baltimore; Washington; and five West Virginia communities—White Sulphur Springs and Rupert in Greenbrier County, Madison and Seth in Boone County, and Four States in Marion County. In only five of these was the order to desegregate rescinded—White Sulphur Springs, Sheridan, Rupert, Milford, and Clarkton. Elsewhere the authorities stood firm in insisting on compliance with the May 17 decision. Legal action is pending in Milford and under consideration in Greenbrier County. A forthright ruling by Judge J. Harper Meredith promptly quelled the "rebellion against the government" instigated by parents at Four States.

Although Harry S. Ashmore, in his study "The Negro and the Schools," contends that "segregation has not been an important factor in school costs," the expense of separate schools appears to have accelerated desegregation. Shortly after the decision was announced, Superintendent Virgil L. Flinn of Kanawha County, West Virginia, in which Charleston is located, declared that a saving of \$250,000 annually could be realized through the elimination of marginal schools and duplicate transportation services. In Fayetteville, Arkansas, the cost of sending Negro high-school students 60 miles to Fort Smith or 150 miles to Hot Springs amounted to \$5,000 a year, and it was partly to save this money that white citizens of Fayetteville moved to open the local high school to Negroes. Charleston, Arkansas, reported a saving of \$4,500 through desegregation. The Clarksville, Missouri, school district estimated it would save \$8,600 a year by admitting Negroes to the high school and an additional sum by closing its unceded Negro elementary school. Superintendent Corning of the District of Columbia reported that for the first time in a decade no funds were requested for additional classroom teachers in Negro schools at a time when the white schools were overstaffed because of declining attendance.

WHILE practically no office-holding white Southerners have acclaimed the Supreme Court decision, many have disavowed wild schemes to abandon the

public schools or to defy the court. Most of the official spokesmen of the region have adopted a wait-and-see attitude, marking time until the decrees are formulated.

The day after the decision Governor Francis Cherry of Arkansas announced: "Arkansas will obey the law. It always has." Governor Gordon Persons of Alabama refused to call a special session of the legislature to consider means of circumventing the ruling. James Folsom, elected to succeed him, has expressed a desire "to be included out of the school-segregation controversy." Within a week after the decision Governor J. Caleb Boggs of Delaware informed the state Board of Education that it would be "the policy of this administration to work toward adjustment to the United States constitutional requirements. I respectfully ask the state Board of Education to proceed toward this objective." In Florida, Senator Spessard Holland told the Kiwanians: "No matter how much we don't like it, we must not have false ideas of the seriousness. This is going to be the law." Representative Charles E. Bennett of Florida said: "I think the federal government should be required to take all necessary steps to make the states carry out the ruling."

Governor Theodore F. McKeldin of Maryland issued a statement asserting: "Maryland prides itself upon being a law-abiding state, and I am sure our citizens and our officials will accept readily the United States Supreme Court's interpretation of our fundamental law." Further, he expressed confidence that "the transition can be brought about in Maryland without confusion and without undue delay." Kentucky, said Governor Lawrence Wetherby, "will do whatever is necessary to comply with the law." He was supported in this attitude by Attorney General J. D. Buckman, Senators Earle C. Clements and John Sherman Cooper, and other state and local officials. In North Carolina the Greensboro school board voted six to one on May 18 to direct the superintendent to begin a study "regarding ways and means of complying with the court's decision." Said D. E. Higgins, chairman of the board, "We must not fight or attempt to circumvent this decision." While describing himself as "terribly disappointed," Governor William B. Umstead of North Carolina said: "This is no

time for rash statements or the proposal of impossible schemes."

Dr. Oliver Hodge, superintendent of public instruction in Oklahoma, declared: "If we don't have to do anything about it until a year after September 1 [1954], it will be all right." In Tennessee, Governor Frank Clement commented: "I must point out it is a decision handed down by a judicial body which we, the American people, under our Constitution and law recognize as supreme in matters of interpreting the law of the land." He noted that pending the final decrees "no change is anticipated in our school system." Backed by Governor William C. Marland, W. W. Trent, West Virginia's superintendent of schools, said on June 1: "As segregation is unconstitutional, boards should, in my opinion, begin immediately to reorganize and readjust their schools to comply with the Supreme Court decision." Later he added: "Complete desegregation will come to West Virginia's public schools in a reasonable time and in the absence of legal action."

Non-office-holding spokesmen in the South have been less restrained than the politicians. Many, through their churches, unions, and other associations, have called for compliance. Various Catholic dioceses have acted to end segregation in schools under their jurisdiction and have spoken up for general compliance. Not only the National Council of Churches but also some of its Southern constituent bodies have endorsed the decision. A resolution of the Southern Baptist Convention recognizes the decision as being "in harmony with the constitutional guaranty of equal freedom to all citizens." Southern units of the Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, and other Protestant churches have approved it.

The Southern Regional Council with headquarters in Atlanta and the Southern Conference Educational Fund located in New Orleans have both called for implementation of the ruling. Even before the decision a convention of the Texas C. I. O. called for the abolition of Jim Crow in that state. Immediately after the decision was handed down, the Georgia Federation of Labor passed a resolution calling for compliance.

ON THE other hand, three Southern states—South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana—have taken steps to amend



Walt Partymiller in the York (Pa.) Gazette and Daily

### *A Lesson Yet to Be Learned*

their constitutions to prevent integration in the public schools. The Louisiana amendment, supplementing a recent passed statute, authorizes the state to use its police powers to continue segregation. In addition, the Louisiana legislature has enacted a law empowering local superintendents to assign pupils to specific schools. Referendums in South Carolina and Georgia have ratified measures paving the way for abolition of the public schools in the event the states are unable to circumvent the court's decision. Mississippi will vote on a similar amendment on December 21. Meanwhile it has tightened registration and voting requirements in an effort to cut down the Negro vote; the state now has 22,000 qualified Negro voters.

In each of these states, however, there has been a measure of organized resistance to the proposed amendments. Governor Talmadge's "private-school plan" was opposed not only by the N. A. A. C. P. but by the Parent-Teachers Association, Federation of Labor, League of Women Voters, and United Church Women of Georgia. Some of the state's leading newspapers also came out against it. The plan was put over by the vote of the rural areas. The Louisiana plan was opposed by the N. A. A. C. P., the Southern Conference Educational Fund, the Bureau of Governmental Research, and the Roman Catholic church. The Mississippi proposal to abandon the public-school system is being resisted by the poorer hill counties in the northeastern part of the state, where the proportion of Negroes is less than in the rich Delta area.

Time and time again, Governor Byrnes, Governor Talmadge, and other

spokesmen for racial bias have declared that Negroes prefer segregation. Governor Hugh White of Mississippi was rash enough to test this theory. Last July he summoned 100 Mississippi Negro leaders to an interracial conference with the Legal Educational Advisory Committee set up by the state legislature. The Negroes were expected to ratify the Governor's proposal for a "voluntary" segregated school plan. Only one of the group spoke up for Jim Crow schools. The others issued a statement declaring themselves "unalterably opposed to any effort of either white or Negro citizens to attempt to circumvent the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States of America outlawing segregation in public schools." "I am stunned," cried Governor White after the conference. "I have believed that certain elements representing the vast majority of Negroes would go along. Now I am definitely of the opinion you can't put any faith in any one of them on this proposition." Considering the pressures to which Negroes are subject in a state like Mississippi their stand was heroic. Already economic reprisals have been organized against Negroes who support the N. A. A. C. P. fight against segregation.

Throughout the region Negro groups and leaders have been all but unanimous in calling for early compliance with the court's ruling. Aside from Percy Greene, the erstwhile militant editor of the Jackson (Mississippi) *Advocate*, and Dr. R. O'Hara Lanier, president of the all-Negro Texas Southern University and former United States Minister to Liberia, I cannot recall a single Negro of national repute who supports the "separate but equal" doctrine. Where fully free to express themselves, the rank and file are no less convinced that segregation must be ended.

Inevitably the court's ruling became a hot political issue in certain of the segregation states. The bigots pledged a fight to the end to preserve the Jim Crow system. Save for the gallant gesture of Mrs. Grace W. Thomas, a gubernatorial candidate in Georgia, none of the office-seekers openly demanded that the ruling be complied with. However, many refrained from urging defiance.

As a test of sentiment, the elections were inconclusive. Georgia elected a rabid segregationist governor. All the nine candidates in the Democratic pri-

mary except the amateur, Mrs. Thomas, were equally committed to continuing segregation. Alabama elected James Folsom, a liberal, who may not advocate integration but who certainly avoided the usual nonsense about the inviolability of segregation. In Tennessee, Governor Frank Clement, who adopted a wait-and-see attitude, easily won the Democratic primary, equivalent to election, over two candidates pledged to oppose desegregation to the bitter end; Senator Estes Kefauver received more than twice as many votes as his opponent, who campaigned on a pro-segregation platform. Maryland's liberal Republican Governor, Theodore R. McKeldin, was reelected over the Democratic candidate, Dr. Harry Clifton Byrd, president of Maryland University, who favored continued segregation. In Texas, Governor Allan Shivers won reelection on a platform calling for continued segregation in public schools. North Carolina elected former Governor Kerr Scott to the United States Senate in the face of the charge that he favored integration of the schools.

A SOUTH which has long neglected the Negro teacher, paying her as much as the white teacher only under compulsion of court edict, has suddenly become gravely concerned about her fate with the advent of integration. Newspapers, school officials, and individuals who never before showed any interest in her welfare are prematurely bemoaning her anticipated unemployment.

As a matter of fact, in the vast majority of newly desegregated communities there has been no wholesale firing of Negro teachers. In some localities with sparse Negro population, where the separate school was marginal, a few colored teachers have been displaced, but in middle-sized and larger cities the number of Negro teachers has not been reduced. Negro women and men are now teaching both white and Negro children in Missouri, West Virginia, and Delaware, as well as in Kansas, Arizona, and New Mexico, where segregation had been permissive. The full quota of 175 Negro teachers is being retained in Kansas City, Kansas, the superintendent reports. In many cities integration of schools has been accompanied by integration of teaching staffs. New Jersey, however, affords the classic example of

what desegregation does to Negro teachers. In 1945-46, before segregation was banned in the state, there were 47 Negro teachers, of whom 415 were assigned to all-Negro schools. In 1953-54 there were 645, teaching white children as well as colored in non-segregated schools.

With the present shortage of teachers estimated as high as 150,000, the 115,000 Negro men and women now teaching in segregated public-school system need not fear loss of employment when the schools are integrated. There simply will not be enough white teachers to replace them. Moreover, Southern whites have for generations intrusted their children, during their early formative years, to the care and training of Negroes. To hold that the relationship cannot be projected into the classroom is irrational.

The record clearly shows that American children of all races, colors, and faiths can go to school together with mutual respect and benefit. Obstacles course remain, but they are not insurmountable. Peaceful desegregation requires planning and action by local leaders of both races. Success can be achieved if the following conditions are met: (1) There must be preparation of the community through full discussion of the meaning of the court's decision in forums sponsored by churches, civic organizations, fraternal orders, parent-teacher associations, trade unions, and other responsible groups. (2) A clear and straightforward statement of policy must be issued by the local school board. (3) This policy must be unwaveringly executed even if there is initial resistance. (4) Police and other law-enforcement officers must act promptly and effectively to restrain mob leaders and prevent violence. (5) Subtle or open attempts to delay, evade, or prevent desegregation must be exposed and crushed. (6) The community must realize that Jim Crow schools are not only illegal but wasteful of economic and human resources, offensive to our moral and political concepts of equality, and damaging to our national prestige and security.

Under these conditions, America's public schools can be expeditiously desegregated. It is a responsibility of citizenship to provide these conditions and to develop a democratic public-school system throughout the nation.