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## The Hidden Cost of Brown v. Board: African American Educators' Resistance to Desegregating Schools

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## The Hidden Cost of *Brown v. Board*: African American Educators' Resistance to Desegregating Schools



On July 24, 1953, following a meeting with the governor of South Carolina regarding the possibility of desegregation, President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in his diary: “I do not believe that prejudices, even palpably unjustifiable prejudices, will succumb to compulsion. Consequently, I believe that Federal law imposed upon our States... would set back the cause of race relations a long, long time.”<sup>1</sup> While not a fervent supporter of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), Eisenhower’s statement was somewhat prophetic. While *Brown* enabled children of all races and backgrounds to have equal opportunity and access in education, poor integration implementation policies and widespread white backlash presented problems for many black students and teachers. Black students lost role models who not only knew them on a personal level, but had a unique understanding of their communities, cultural identities, and individual situations. Many blacks believed that “without the principals, the members of the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles M. Payne, “‘The Whole United States is Southern!’: *Brown v. Board* and the Mystification of Race,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (2004): 88.

African American community lost their voice in education, and the students also lost role models whom they were able to trust and emulate.”<sup>2</sup> Because education was one of the only well-respected career paths open to blacks, there was an abundance of well-trained, talented black teachers. The presence of skillful teachers “resulted in many all-Black schools as places where children received an excellent academic education, along with schooling from their Black elders in ‘the ways of the world.’”<sup>3</sup> Despite the saturation of talented African Americans in the national teaching force before the *Brown* case, this would change drastically after 1954. Over 38,000 black teachers in the South and border states lost their jobs after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954.<sup>4</sup> Well over a half-century after *Brown*, black teachers make up a miniscule fraction of the teaching force, which has negatively impacted many black students in terms of test scores and graduation rates.<sup>5</sup> Losing tens of thousands of black teachers in the teaching force in the mid-twentieth century has had lasting effects on today’s teaching force. In 2000, only 14 percent of teachers were persons of color.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not black educators and administrators could have predicted both the positive and negative consequences of the *Brown* decision, it is clear they had major, well-founded reservations about desegregation. This was certainly true of several black families and teachers in Topeka, Kansas, even decades before the NAACP picked its famous fight with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

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<sup>2</sup> Martha Lash and Monica Ratcliffe, “The Journey of an African American Teacher Before and After *Brown v. Board of Education*,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 83, no. 3 (2014): 334.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>4</sup> Deirdre Oakley, Jacob Stowell, & John R. Logan, “The Impact of Desegregation on Black Teachers in the Metropolis, 1970-2000,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 9 (2009): 1576-1598.

<sup>5</sup> According to Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Russell W. Irvine in their 2007 report, “The Impact of the Desegregation Process on the Education of Black Students: A Retrospective Analysis,” by 1983 African American students scored an average of 377 on the SAT verbal test, while all other students scored an average of 476. In addition, “One-half of African American students who were sophomores in 1980 had dropped out or graduated ‘high-risk’ by 1984.” During the same era, the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that 53% of “white eleventh grade students could perform complex reading tasks”, while “only 20% of African American students performed similarly.”

<sup>6</sup> Deirdre Oakley, Jacob Stowell, & John R. Logan, “The Impact of Desegregation on Black Teachers in the Metropolis, 1970-2000.”

## Black Topeka at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

Topeka had a thriving black community in the decades leading up to *Brown v. Board*. In the 1880s and 1890s many blacks owned and managed shops, businesses, and several newspapers.<sup>7</sup> Even though the city was segregated, many blacks played a prominent role in their thriving communities; from teachers to preachers to lawyers, many African American citizens of Topeka were highly respected and also served as role models for the larger community. The black press in Topeka was a point of pride for many black citizens in the capital city. Black printers in Topeka published the *Topeka Plaindealer* from 1900 to 1932. Teachers, such as Mamie Williams, also served as role models in the community, faithfully teaching their students in schools set apart from the white schools scattered across town.

Some black teachers in Topeka were content providing the city's black children with a separate, but enriching educational experience. W.E.B. Du Bois, a prominent black leader and founder of the NAACP, believed blacks were better off maintaining their own distinct communities. Du Bois eventually distanced himself from the NAACP, as his views shifted away from the Association's stance of "unmitigated opposition to segregation." Du Bois concluded that opposition to segregation in fact "undermine[d], not enhance[d], black pride."<sup>8</sup> Du Bois cited the benefits of blacks attending their own schools and churches, living in their own neighborhoods, and "associat[ing] with black friends." Du Bois saw segregated schools as a way to protect young black children and give them a chance to attend school where they were safe, welcome, and "trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be black in the

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas 1865-1915: A Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 82-83.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice* (New York: Random House, 1975), 165.

year of salvation of 1935.” He believed black teachers understood what it meant to be black and were better equipped to connect and empathize with their black pupils. According to Du Bois, it was either that or using black children as “doormats to be spit and tramped upon and lied to by ignorant social climbers.”<sup>9</sup> Although Du Bois’s primary concern was that of the safety of black children, he (and any teachers who opposed desegregation) was at risk for being deemed a hypocrite by the NAACP and other supporters of desegregation.

Unlike black schools across the Jim Crow South, black schools in Topeka were well-funded and well-respected. Black teachers had a significant amount of prestige, not only in the educational sphere, but in the public sphere in general. Several black educators in Topeka schools, for example, were incredibly well-educated, many of them holding not only bachelor’s degrees, but master’s degrees as well. In his 1975 book, *Simple Justice*, Richard Kluger documented that “at two of the four black schools in [Topeka], more of the teachers held master’s degrees than at any of the white grade schools.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, black schools in Topeka were adequately and equitably funded in comparison to local white schools. The evening edition of the *Topeka State Journal* on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1915, documented the amount of financial resources black schools in Topeka received. According to the article, “Negro Schools [were] More Expensive Than Those For Whites.”<sup>11</sup> African American parents made sure their children received a good education, one as satisfactory and equitable as that which white children received. As the article states:

Representatives of the colored race at school board meetings frequently intimate that the board does not do as much for the colored children as for the whites. As a matter of fact the average cost per pupil at the colored schools in the last school year was \$35.74 as compared with \$26.82 for white children.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” *Journal of Negro Education* 4, no. 3 (July 1935): 335.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>11</sup> “High Cost of City Schools,” *Topeka State Journal* (Topeka, KS), Aug. 4, 1915.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Physically and materially, elementary schools for both groups of children in Topeka were commensurate, with many black schools even edging out their white counterparts in terms of funding. When new schools were built in the 1920s, the *Kansas City Times* praised both the black and white schools, claiming that the schools were “not only scientifically correct and modern, but things of beauty.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, a member of the local NAACP made it known that in some cases, “the Negro schools are even better than the white schools.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, black teachers had an uncommon rapport with black students and their families. Richard Ridley, a former pupil at Monroe Elementary, said the following about his school: “My grade school education was not inferior, it was superior. I never felt my school was inferior.”<sup>15</sup> Black families were proud of their educational institutions and felt a true sense of community with the black schools their children attended. If ever there was a threat on their schools, and thus their sense of community, black families in Topeka felt compelled to face the peril head-on.

One such peril presented itself in October of 1915. The evening edition of *The Topeka Daily State Journal* reported that the “Negroes [were] aroused” at the closing of a local black school for economic reasons.<sup>16</sup> The headlines read that the “Closing of Madison St. School Brings Strong Protest. Colored Minister Feels Rights of Race Are Threatened. Even Janitors Kicked Out.” The article contains a letter to the editor written by N. L. Smith, a local black minister at Lane Chapel, documenting his concern about the closing of the school.

To the Editor of the State Journal: The abandonment of the Madison school is the latest phase in the policy of retrenchment of the board of education—a retrenchment which in the last one and one-half years has had most evil effects upon the colored schools and

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<sup>13</sup> *Kansas City Times*, November 15, 1927.

<sup>14</sup> Franklin Williams to Thurgood Marshall, September 9, 1948 and Glouster Current to Dr. Porter Davis, September 15, 1948, Kansas State Conference Files, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Microfilm Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

<sup>15</sup> Charise Cheney, “Blacks on *Brown*: Intra-Community Debates over School Desegregation in Topeka, Kansas, 1941-1955,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 488.

<sup>16</sup> “Negroes Aroused,” *Topeka Daily State Journal* (Topeka, KS), Oct. 2, 1915.

school teachers, for within that time there has resulted a loss of more than five and one-half teachers in the colored schools, including one principal, now the complete abandonment of one of our schools, in one of the most thickly populated districts of the city, caps the climax. We fear this is but a beginning.<sup>17</sup>

The tone of this letter shows the black community's understanding of what would happen when the school was closed. Black parents feared what it might mean for their children and their children's teachers. The potential consequences from the closing of a black school mirrored potential consequences of forced integration, including poor implementation policies. Some blacks worried about the safety of their children and the job security of their teachers. Pastor Smith was not unfounded in his fear. He and many others in the black community understood the consequences of closing a black school, and how this could potentially erode a fundamental foundation of black culture, mobility, and identity in Topeka. But Pastor Smith did not stop his argument there. He continued:

We feel it to be a very unjust species of economy which lops off the heads and diminishes the number of positions of those on the educational firing line in order to justify itself in paying overhead officials. And this also by cutting off the heads of colored people, who at best have few enough opportunities, and who have for years faithfully served the board... In one year the children of Madison school have been scattered, some to Monroe and some to Harrison. Then it is reported that they are so few that the school can not be maintained. Moreover, to make bad matters worse, the last colored janitor, but one, who is in daily suspense, has been removed from white schools. This in Kansas! We have come to a pretty pass when a colored man is not fit to clean up buildings after white children. Denied opportunities in every direction, the one decent occupation of a public nature, teaching, has been reduced to a minimum.<sup>18</sup>

Smith could not hide his disgust with the "Free State" of Kansas and the way it treated its black teachers. Teaching was one of the few positions open to African Americans where they could earn both a decent living and the respect of the community. Smith understood that a direct threat

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> *Topeka Daily State Journal*, Oct. 2, 1915.

to teachers' careers was a direct threat on their status in the community as leaders and role models. But teachers were not the only ones threatened by the closing of segregated schools. Staff, such as janitors and cooks, feared job loss as well. Ultimately, the black community in Topeka understood they had to cooperate and work together to ensure their children had access to good education, which meant securing the retention of black teachers in black schools.

Segregated schools in Kansas had been an issue since the territorial era. While it is true some settlers came to Kansas to fight for the Free State cause during the days of "Bleeding Kansas," Free State rhetoric was largely based on economic and political reasons. In 1858, in response to the Leavenworth Constitution, the editor of the Leavenworth *Settler* wrote a letter to the ironically named territorial newspaper *The Herald of Freedom*, detailing his reservations about the constitution:

The other point is the equality of white and negro children in the free schools to be established by law. If approved by the people, negroes will be entitled to equal privileges with the whites, under the Leavenworth Constitution. We don't believe in, nor can we recognize, the equality of the negro race. We want to make Kansas a Free White State, and exclude negroes entirely.<sup>19</sup>

The issue of segregation in education in Kansas was thus older than the state itself. It was an issue settlers wished to resolve before statehood. In his letter the editor noted a striking truth: Kansas was not the fabled Free State where freed blacks could start a new life and prosper from the fruits of their own labor. According to the editor, the Free State was reserved for whites only. White men in the territory went to the ballot box to vote on issues including black suffrage and separate schools. A conversation recorded between two senators in *The Emporia News* in 1868 illustrated popular feeling toward the issue of segregation in that era. Senator Glick asked Senator Plumb if he is in favor of integrated schools, and Mr. Plumb responded that this issue

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<sup>19</sup> *The Kansas Herald of Freedom* (Lawrence, KS), May 8, 1858.



should be left for the people to decide. As Plumb did not really answer the question, Glick repeated the question two more times before Plumb offered an answer. Plumb replied, "I don't know that I am, but if I lived where the people voted to educate them together, and I had a child it should go there [an integrated school]." Glick then asked:

If there were fifty white children in a school district and three negroes, and you thought it impolitic to establish a separate school, would you advocate putting them in the white school?

To which Plumb responded:

Certainly. I don't see why I should not. What I want to get at is this spirit of prejudice. I confess to it my self, but at the same time it is wrong and unfounded...I say if you set up the black children in this way, you give the negro an importance in our schools that is not commensurate with his position in society, but which helps to keep up the distinction. It would make them an aristocracy...I am in favor of each district doing as it pleases, but unless you have a penalty, nearly every school board will deny the negro the right to come into the schools.<sup>20</sup>

This conversation shows the underlying prejudices of many whites toward blacks and the desire of some whites in Reconstruction Kansas to keep African Americans in inferior positions, including in the field of education. In fact, the notion of blacks and whites learning together threatened the very foundation of white supremacy and superiority. Many whites assumed, and feared, that if blacks and whites went to school together, blacks would suddenly feel equal, perhaps even intelligent. And this of course, according to many whites, would lead blacks to become not only overconfident, but skeptical of the carefully crafted façade of white superiority. In addition, many whites argued for the separation of the races in order to protect white womanhood. Thus, some whites decided the safest plan of action was to keep their children separate to prevent mixing and the upward mobility of blacks. An African American aristocracy

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<sup>20</sup> "The Negro in the Legislature," *The Emporia News* (Emporia, KS), Feb. 21, 1868. Glick would become governor of Kansas in the 1880s.

was simply unimaginable for whites in Reconstruction Era Kansas. While this was true for most of the white population in Kansas, there were others who took a more progressive stance regarding the schooling issue. In 1870 the *Kansas Educational Journal* wrote a plea entitled “Admit the Colored Children.” Their plea included the following:

No separate schools are maintained for [the black children of Ottawa], but they are distributed through the several schools precisely as the children of other citizens are distributed. This is as it should be. In Emporia the same ruling prevails, as it does in numerous other localities in the State. Why may it not be made universal? Why not do away with the last relic of the senseless prejudice against color which has so long disgraced the American people? Let the State now say that [the black children] shall have the same educational advantages; that they shall be educated in the same schools.<sup>21</sup>

While this plea certainly did not speak for the wider Kansas population, it represented a slowly growing movement dedicated to desegregating schools. Even decades later, by the turn of the century, many of these prejudices had not changed in the slightest. However, black and white populations had changed the ways in which they responded.

By the early 1900s, the state was in much the same predicament regarding racially separate schools. Few districts throughout the state had integrated schools, though they did exist. For example, as early as 1905, black and white schoolchildren in Emporia attended the same school. After white residents there petitioned the school board to separate white and black school children, the board denied their request. The judge ruled that “the separation of the races in the schools was contrary to law.”<sup>22</sup> This, however, was most surely not the case in Topeka. While high schools and middle schools were integrated, elementary schools were still segregated.<sup>23</sup> This came with the stipulation that segregated schools for children must have equal facilities. Schools for black children also had to “be as easy of access as those provided for white

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<sup>21</sup> *Emporia News* (Emporia, KS), October 7, 1870.

<sup>22</sup> “No Negro Schools in Emporia,” *Topeka State Journal* (Topeka, KS), Mar. 8, 1905.

<sup>23</sup> Following *Graham v. Topeka Board of Education* (1941), junior high schools in Topeka became integrated. While junior high and high schools were integrated in the classroom, social activities were still largely segregated.

children.”<sup>24</sup> Clearly, several school boards conveniently overlooked this requirement, as all too often black schoolchildren had to walk several miles each way to school, often passing through railroad yards and crossings, and other industrial areas. While in many instances black parents wished to send their children to white schools due to issues of convenience and safety, black families had other reasons for wanting their children to attend white schools.

In many cases, black families wished for their children to attend white schools simply because of the injustices of segregation. According to a 1908 evening edition of the *Topeka Daily State Journal*, “A small ‘race problem’ was hammered out in the court of Topeka.” The father of two black children was “convicted for not sending [his] children to [a] colored school” across town:

The Gay family lives at 127 North Tyler street, within the Sumner school district [the white school district]. Because the children were negroes, Professor Whitmore, ruler of such things, ordered the children to attend Madison school, on the other side of town. Gay decided to “buck the tiger,” and refused to send the children to the East Side school, which is devoted exclusively to negro children. The school has negro teachers and principal, and to avoid some of the anti-mixture trouble arising in the city, the school management has endeavored to place colored children in that school. Gay objected to this arrangement, and made no defense except that he did not live in Madison school district... A number of the negroes of the city have resented the attempt of the school board to separate their children from the whites.

It is no wonder Gay decided to “buck the tiger.” It made sense for families to send their children to schools in their neighborhood instead of miles across town. The fact that the Madison Street School was comparable in terms of resources, funding, and teacher qualifications and reputations speaks volumes. Gay could have sent his children to a good black school with good black teachers and nice black children, but he chose not to because it simply did not make sense. Gay and other families believed that what the school board was asking them to do was unreasonable and devoid of common sense.

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<sup>24</sup> “Can Build Separate Schools,” *Baxter Springs News* (Baxter Springs, KS), Dec. 17, 1908.

In the years 1904 and 1905 the town of Bonner Springs, Kansas, saw similar pushback from black families upon being told there would be separate schools for their children. Black children refused to attend school when told separate rooms were set aside solely for them and their black teachers. To make matters worse, “Two rooms on the first floor were set aside for the 118 negro pupils,” reported the *Topeka State Journal*. “The negroes refused to submit to the proposition and all the negro pupils went home. A meeting of the negroes was held and it was decided to contest the right of the school board to maintain separate schools.”<sup>25</sup> Neither teachers, nor parents and students, could fathom having roughly 60 students in an elementary school classroom. Not only was this wholly unfair to the teacher, but unfair to each student as well. Both the children and their parents were not willing to stand by and watch their educational experience and quality be dictated and demolished by the bureaucracy of a white school board. Unfortunately, in the battle of black parents versus white school board, it is not difficult to imagine who won the battle the vast majority of the time. A little less than a year later, the racial clashing over classroom policies continued. And, as usual, black families were made out to be the ones causing the problems, when they were simply fighting for what they believed was equality for their children. Afraid that the protesting of black parents would escalate, the school board asked the sheriff’s department for assistance. According to the *Topeka State Journal*, the school board:

asked for the presence of deputy sheriffs next Monday to prevent a repetition of the turbulent scenes there last Tuesday when the negroes would not permit their children to be enrolled in separate schools, thereby causing a postponement of the opening. [According to J.D. Waters, a member of the board], The negroes will have to be satisfied with this. We are acting for the best interests of the school and for the two races. We do not expect any serious trouble. There are a few negroes who will refuse to submit to our plans, but in time they will be forced to submit.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “A Color Line Clash Comes Up at Bonner Springs,” *Topeka State Journal* (Topeka, KS), Sept. 19, 1904.

<sup>26</sup> “Negroes Still Angry,” *Topeka State Journal* (Topeka, KS), Sept. 8, 1905.

Black parents wanted the best for their students, and in this case, they believed it was getting an education alongside their white counterparts and learning from white teachers, not being relegated to less than a handful of classrooms with a few black teachers. Regardless of their desire for an integrated educational experience, they were virtually powerless against Waters' firm vow of forcing blacks to submit to the board's plans. Nevertheless, local newspapers offered no shortage of stories when experiments of educating whites and blacks together went horribly wrong.

The evening edition of the *Topeka State Journal* announced a "race riot" taking place in Independence, Kansas, on September 12, 1907. The paper reported that "A race riot was narrowly averted at Lincoln school...where two negro men and three negro women attacked the white superintendent...The trouble started at the afternoon recess, when a young darky got into a fight on the playground with a white boy." According to the paper it was expected that these type of negative interactions were to be expected if the whites and blacks were allowed to attend school together. Furthermore, the newspaper suggested that it was incidents such as these that explained why blacks and whites were better off in segregated facilities. Black educators and white segregationists used these episodes as evidence of the perceived dangers of integration. Both groups saw potential physical and emotional threats to children of both races. The *Journal* reported that in the town of Independence, there was "growing sentiment for the separation of white and negro children in the public schools."<sup>27</sup> While newspapers reported episodes of dissension between blacks and whites in sensationalistic tones, discord and violence between the races was a serious concern for black families, and made some black Kansans fear the white racism and violence that would result in the wake of desegregation.

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<sup>27</sup> "In a Race Riot," *Topeka State Journal* (Topeka, KS), Sept. 12, 1907.

## Black Teachers Respond to the Prospect of Desegregation

While many black families and teachers in Kansas did indeed want their children to attend white schools, other black families and teachers across the state did not see the same virtues in desegregation. There were many reasons for this hesitation, including concern for their children's well-being; satisfaction with their existing schools and teachers; the sound reputation of black teachers in that era; and the sense of community created by black families and teachers in black schools. Oftentimes, black parents and teachers had similar reasons for not wanting to integrate. According to Jonas Rosenthal in his article, "Negro Teachers' Attitudes Toward Desegregation," many black teachers shied away from desegregation for the following reasons:

1. It discourages racial pride.
2. It prevents Negro children from expressing themselves naturally.
3. Negroes do not want to be where they are merely tolerated.
4. It would end the cultural leadership of Negro teachers.
5. White teachers would not understand Negro children.
6. Loss of incentive for Negro students who want to become teachers.
7. Loss of positions by Negro teachers and principals.<sup>28</sup>

There was much truth especially to the point that "white teachers would not understand Negro children." Black teachers, especially in the era of Jim and Jane Crow, more so than anyone else, understood their students and what they experienced daily. Black teachers, more so than white teachers, could connect with black students based on similar cultural and community experiences. There was a disconnect when a white teacher tried and failed to grasp the experience of black children and the discrimination they faced on a daily basis in an era of racial inequality and injustice. In fact, as early as 1897, the National Educational Association (NEA) recognized this fact. According to *The Advocate*, a Topeka newspaper, the NEA "reports that in

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<sup>28</sup> Jonas O. Rosenthal, "Negro Teachers' Attitudes Toward Desegregation," *The Journal of Negro Education* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1957): 70.

its opinion better results can be obtained by providing Negro teachers for Negro schools.”<sup>29</sup> This was not a local organization advocating for separate schools; one of the largest and most well-known educational organizations believed that separate schools would better serve both races.

Most white school boards across the nation failed to comprehend the experiences and needs of black schoolchildren, whereas black teachers were equipped to better understand their own students. Black teachers and administrators feared the intense white backlash that would occur after the Supreme Court banned racially segregated schools. According to sociologist Oliver C. Cox in his 1953 work, *Negro Teachers: Martyrs to Integration*, “‘integration at any price’ may work against the interests of colored people.”<sup>30</sup> Even shortly before the *Brown* decision, Cox was able to predict with uncanny prescience that desegregation would not be all it was anticipated to be, due in large part to a swell in white racism.

Even those who came long before Oliver Cox predicted potential perils resulting from desegregation. In a 1906 letter to the Kansas state superintendent of public instruction, J. Silas Harris, a black principal at the Penn School in Kansas City, Missouri, provided reasons for why segregation in education was acceptable, and even beneficial, for blacks:

While I have no disposition to meddle in Kansas affairs only in so far as they concern the whole race, I can say, however, without hesitancy that were I a resident of your state, I would, if the facilities were equal, be unreservedly in favor of separate schools. The contention for mixed schools by members of my race in Kansas is not calculated to bring about that harmony between the two races which all true race men so much desire.<sup>31</sup>

In the eyes of a black principal in Kansas City, desegregation would only mean further fracturing of already tenuous race relations and a rise in whites’ resentment toward blacks. Harris understood that desegregation would promote its own set of special problems for blacks to

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<sup>29</sup> *The Advocate* (Topeka, Kansas), July 7, 1897.

<sup>30</sup> Rosenthal, 68.

<sup>31</sup> “School or Jail,” *Topeka Daily State Journal* (Topeka, Kansas), Sept. 17, 1906.

handle, such as the mistreatment and bullying of black children by white teachers and students. To Harris, keeping separate schools for the races would foster neutral, if not positive relations between the races, whereas integration meant upsetting this delicate balance.

It is clear many black teachers and administrators across the state of Kansas felt this way. Further evidence comes from a letter written in 1919 by a black teacher to the governor of Kansas, Henry J. Allen. Mr. Crosby, a “teacher of 18 years,” from Weir, Kansas, wrote to Governor Allen to inform him that segregation of the races was better for African Americans:

As a teacher of eighteen years practical experience in several states, I am thoroughly convinced that my race will do far better by the separation. As I am colored, I would not write thus, if I did not actually believe what I write... I can prove to you that a separation is the best for my people... If we are to develop as a race, (and all races, the Negro excepted, have a strong tendency to racial unity) we must do so in the same logical way that other races have attained their present status in the civilization scheme of mankind. No race can develop properly when it seeks to lose its identity among another race, nor can any race develop without ideals necessary to such development.<sup>32</sup>

Crosby, like some other black teachers and working-class blacks across the state, agreed that desegregation of schools meant an almost certain crumbling of the black community. Black educators and administrators would no longer enjoy prestige in their communities, which would do nothing but harm the black community and blacks’ desire for upward mobility and respect. Crosby believed that to gain status and respect as African Americans, the race would have to work together as a whole, on their own. To him, there was no better way to do this than to keep schools segregated, where blacks could develop a stronger sense of community, cohesiveness, and racial pride. Desegregation was a direct threat to the development and advancement of black families. He continued:

The best friends, in your race, to us are the ones who, without prejudice, malice or the like, allow us to train ourselves in the most valuable lessons of independency, self-

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<sup>32</sup> W.S. Crosby to Governor Henry J. Allen, January 18, 1919, Henry Allen correspondence, Box 18, Folder 1, Kansas State Historical Society.



respect, and racial unity, -things absolutely impossible where any race seeks to thrive where it is not wanted. I know that many white people do not object to going to school with colored people; but that does not give the advantage that rightfully belongs to us in the mixed schools.

Crosby wanted whites, and upper-class blacks, to understand why segregation benefited the black race. He appreciated whites who understood the plight of blacks. He informed the governor that blacks understood what was best for their own race. Whites may have had good intentions wanting to integrate schools, but those whites failed to understand what integration would mean for black children, families, teachers, schools, and communities. Crosby continued his argument:

Upon examination, you will note that nine-tenths of the graduates from our schools who have clung to the mixed school idea, are not making good. You ask why, for the fact cannot be successfully denied. The answer is very easy. They feel that they are outside of their race; they seek to be white socially and in other ways not at all possible under present social conditions. The tendency to force association is one of the things that has made the social ostracism as it now is.

Here Crosby argued that the reason desegregated schools failed blacks was because it instilled blacks with the misleading feeling that they could be white. In other words, desegregation gave blacks a false sense of identity, and the phenomenon of blacks trying to “be white,” did not bode well for blacks in that era. The “tendency to force association” he spoke of permeated the issue of desegregation. It stemmed from the inability of both whites and upper-class blacks to fully grasp and empathize with the black experience, specifically that of working-class blacks and black educators. There was a disassociation between those blacks who did not experience and understand segregated schools on a daily basis, and those blacks who went to a segregated school and had competent and caring black teachers who brought their own unique insider’s perspective to the classroom. Crosby’s argument did not stop there, instead gaining momentum and fervor:

The opposers [sic] of separate schools cannot give one logical reason why they wish to go to white schools. They say they get better training. I answer that such is truly possible; but not at all true. If they do get better training, then why do they object to a colored man teaching who has had that training? They say that they are sure of good buildings and

equal courses of study. I answer that the spirit of the law provides for equal accommodations... Can a colored man learn more in a \$100,000 building where he is not wanted, than he can in the woods where he is welcome? They say the white man is making a cat's paw of them by the separation. I answer if you can make a cat's paw of me in MY HOUSE then most assuredly you can make a good one of me in YOUR HOUSE.

This quote directly relates to the fact that some blacks did not want to be “where they [were] merely tolerated.”<sup>33</sup> Parents did not want their children to have to settle, so to speak, for their educational experience. Because education was key to the upward mobility of blacks, black parents and teachers wanted the best for their children; in many cases this meant educating their children in all black schools, away from potentially hostile white teachers and students. Here Crosby vowed he and the black race would not be taken advantage of or be outsmarted by whites with their own agendas. Crosby asserted that blacks would not simply stand by when the future of their education and social standing was at stake. He further alluded to the issue of curricula in desegregated schools:

You teach your people the deeds of the great men of your race, I try to teach my people the great deeds of the great men of my race. Is not that the logical way? Your people have great confidence in their race, should not we have great confidence in our race? Your people, north or south, would never employ a colored teacher to teach your children when a member of your race could teach. Ought we to feel better under teachers of the white race? Your people keep your own history and do not ask the colored man to keep it for you. Should we expect you to keep our history? Your people have developed by individual effort, and have added that effort to the progress of your race. Are we to lie dormant in our efforts to increase the possessions of our race?

Crosby argued that if, in fact, desegregation prevailed, black school children would not be exposed to a proper curriculum suitable for their unique cultural and racial experiences. Crosby attested that it was only reasonable and right that black children learn about black historical figures and “great men.” In this era textbooks were written by whites, for whites; it seems natural

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<sup>33</sup> Rosenthal, 70.

that blacks would desire culturally relevant and representative texts for their own children. Clearly, whites could not be trusted with respecting and representing black history and the African American experience; thus, it was up to blacks to ensure that their children, in separate schools, would have ready access to that history. This was not an isolated concern. Many black teachers across the country argued against desegregation, for many of the same reasons.

### African American Teachers Resist Desegregation

Roughly 82,000 black teachers were a part of the national teaching force leading up to the 1954 *Brown* decision. That number would drop by the tens of thousands following the decision.<sup>34</sup> By these standards, it is no wonder so many black teachers feared what desegregation might bring. Just as black children and parents enjoyed the tight-knit communities created by black schools, black teachers enjoyed their role in these communities as well. Black teachers felt protective toward their students and wanted them to receive the best education possible—something black students would likely not have received from many white teachers in an integrated school system. Just as black teachers feared uncertainty about their careers, they feared the crumbling of black children’s quality of education. In the article “The Journey of an African American Teacher Before and After *Brown v. Board of Education*,” a retired black teacher from the South reflected on what *Brown v. Board* meant for her and her students:

I just wondered how they would get along, whether they would respond well or not [to integration]. And, yes that worried me, and Rainbow [principal of Lincoln School] made such a big deal out of it, you know, because he said the students wouldn’t get the attention that we gave them. Our Lincoln faculty had teaching licenses, master’s degrees and doctorates. Some were authors. Oh, I tell you, it was something; and every kid that went to Lincoln should feel like I do. They learned triple the amount at Lincoln that they would learn any place else.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Rosenthal, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Lash & Ratcliffe, “The Journey of an African American Teacher Before and After *Brown v. Board of Education*,” *Journal of Negro Education* 83, no. 3 (2014): 331.

This quote captures the sense of resentment and apprehension some black teachers felt toward integration because of what it meant for their students' futures both academically and culturally.

Many African Americans fought against desegregation in large part to retain their cultural capital and cultural institutions.<sup>36</sup> Cultural capital refers to the “black community’s collective efforts to provide resources for the education of black children.” Just as in Nashville and across the South, black families in Topeka, Kansas, were highly invested in their cultural capital. They oversaw schools, churches, businesses, and social groups in which they took great pride. They were unwilling to relinquish this cultural capital in the face of integration and the NAACP leaders pushing for change. Some NAACP members who fought for desegregation failed to empathize with and understand the plight of everyday, working-class blacks in Topeka and around the country. When black teachers voiced their fears concerning possible unemployment, the NAACP claimed that job loss was “the price of change.”<sup>37</sup> The intersection of race and class could not have been more apparent; while several middle and upper-class blacks saw desegregation as primarily an overwhelming good, they failed to understand the complex situations of inner-city, working class black families who may have preferred to preserve their black schools and communities. One Topeka teacher was unwilling to pay the NAACP’s “price of change.” Her name was Mamie Williams.

Mamie L. Williams

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<sup>36</sup> Sonya Ramsey, “We Will Be Ready Whenever They Are: African American Teachers’ Responses To The *Brown* Decision and Public School Integration in Nashville, Tennessee, 1954-1966,” *Journal of African American History* 90, no. ½ (Winter 2005): 33.

<sup>37</sup> Payne, “The Whole United States is Southern!”: *Brown v. Board* and the Mystification of Race, *The Journal of American History*: 90.

Williams, one of a handful of Topeka educators who expressed their apprehension regarding desegregation, understood the powerful role teachers played in the Topeka community. A former pupil of Ms. Williams, Darlene Jackson, noted the vital role Williams had in the wider community: “In those days they followed your home life. She knew my parents. She was more than just being a teacher in your school—she was in your community.”<sup>38</sup> Williams was well-respected and trusted not only in the black Topeka community, but in the city as a whole. Because female teachers were terminated if they chose to get married, Williams chose instead to be a career educator, devoting decades to the profession. Williams understood the importance of, and power behind, curricula in black schools, even writing textbooks about black history. However, like many people during this era, Williams’ beliefs on desegregation were not black and white. They were complex and changing.

In 1935 Williams wrote an essay titled “Weekly Observations on the Achievement of Integration.”<sup>39</sup> Williams expressed her frustration with the lack of success in solving the country’s race problem:

By integration we mean the development of a wholeness within the individual through purposeful, dynamic and courageous activities in which all respects of being are involved... The only way for black folks, white folks, red folks and all folks to get together understandingly is to get together understandingly. It seems to me that a whole souled application of the Golden Rule would solve the race problem and establish proper race relationships. Each year the talk about it goes round and round and comes out at the beginning—just a subject and a discussion. Nobody does anything to get at the root of the matter. We go on being unethical, jealous, envious, unfaithful, prejudiced and are contented with meaning to overcome these weaknesses at a later date instead of dropping them as quickly as one does a red hot poker... We fume and fret about the race problem when all about us it is being solved by the pupil accompanying the professor at his violin and the teacher ministering to both mind and spirit of his pupils of another race group.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Kristen Hays, “Unforgettable Teacher will Forever have her Name Linked to Education,” *Topeka Capital Journal*, November 26, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Mamie L. Williams Papers, Kansas State Historical Society.

<sup>40</sup> Mamie L. Williams Correspondence, 1930-1949, Kansas State Historical Society

Here Williams suggested the race problem could be alleviated partly by the integration of school children. Furthermore, in order to improve race relations, it was the responsibility of teachers to look after *all* of their students' intellectual and spiritual well-being. At this juncture Williams believed that teachers could play a pivotal role in improving race relations by being willing to educate all types of children together. She would later pivot and decide, as a growing number of blacks in Topeka had, that race relations would be improved by the education of black students in their own classrooms with their own black teachers and curriculum.

Throughout her career, Williams was both a teacher and principal at black schools in Topeka. For decades she was dedicated to providing a rigorous and relevant academic experience for young black students. Williams and her fellow educators were unwilling to give this up. When called to testify in the *Graham v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, Williams warned her fellow teachers that integration almost certainly meant the loss of jobs for several black teachers. In response to the *Graham* decision, a "delegation of twenty-five prominent colored Topekans appeared before the Board of Education Monday night, June 23 and requested that it continue to operate seventh and eighth grades in the four colored schools."<sup>41</sup> A spokesman for the group was reported to have informed the board that "at least 90 per cent of the colored people in Topeka want their children to go to the colored schools" for the reasons that their children would be better served by black teachers. The group, comprised of black educators and administrators, contended that black children can "get more out of training by colored teachers and association with children of their own race." They believed that if integration was forced upon the children they "would develop an inferiority complex and would drop out."<sup>42</sup> This is

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<sup>41</sup> "Equal Education Decision Causes Uproar in Topeka; Jobs are at Stake," *The Plaindealer* (Topeka, Kansas), July 4, 1941.

<sup>42</sup> *The Plaindealer* (Topeka, Kansas), July 4, 1941.

striking, considering that the argument during the *Brown* case would be that segregation, not integration, contributed to feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem in black children. Williams herself espoused the belief that black teachers had more to offer black students than white teachers could offer black students.<sup>43</sup> However, because of the nature of her position and prestigious role in the Topeka community, Williams was prevented from being overly vocal about the perceived perils of desegregation during her career. Williams and other black teachers retained their positions because they did not actively oppose desegregation. On the other hand, teachers who refused to support desegregation did not have their contracts renewed the following year. In addition, teachers who had testified during the *Graham* case in 1941 and were not in favor of integration were also let go. Eight African American teachers, some who had been educators for several years, lost their teaching positions following the *Graham* case.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Crosby and Harris, two black educators unafraid to speak frankly about their hesitation regarding the issue, Williams, like many other black teachers concerned with protecting their careers, resisted in thought more so than deed.

### Citizen Over Teacher

F.M. Moon, executive secretary of the Oklahoma Association of Negro Teachers, recognized teachers' concerns about job security. He said the following about this issue: "I know our teachers feel that if it is a question of losing our jobs or having segregated schools, we will take the job loss."<sup>45</sup> This was a bold statement that did not ring true for a number of educators, including Williams. As idealistic as some educators may have been, most teachers wanted, and

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<sup>43</sup> *Simple Justice*, 380.

<sup>44</sup> Connie Sawyer (niece of Daniel Sawyer) interview by author, Topeka, Kansas, March 1992, transcript *Brown v. Board of Education Oral History Project*, Kansas State Historical Society.

<sup>45</sup> Rosenthal, 67.

needed, stability. However, there seemed to be a pervasive theme of teachers identifying themselves as being African Americans over teachers, and their race/ethnicity played a greater role than their identities as teachers during the push for desegregation. In his 1962 work, “Implications of Integration for the Southern Teacher,” Willard E. Gandy, referenced the opinion of an observer: “There is little indication that fear of loss of employment or other factors will lead Negro teachers to support continued school segregation. For the most part, they are Negroes first, and teachers second.”<sup>46</sup> Regarding desegregation, some black teachers saw themselves first as African Americans, and as African Americans they must be for desegregation in order to promote racial harmony, justice, and equality, which they had long been fighting for. Thus, if they were to have been vocal and expressed the concern that desegregation was not what was best for many black communities across the country, they would have been branded hypocrites by those blacks and whites doing what they deemed best for black communities. Teachers did not want to risk perpetuating an oxymoron; as teachers, they were held to a high standard, and as such were naturally expected to desire and promote desegregation as beneficial to the field of education. This was made apparent at the Conference of Southern Negro Educators in Hot Springs, Arkansas, held a few months after the *Brown* decision. A group of Southern teachers agreed upon the following: “Negro educators should not and cannot afford to be a party to any plan designed to nullify the Court’s decision... We as Negro citizens stand ready to cooperate wholeheartedly in the progressive fulfillment of these democratic objectives.”<sup>47</sup> Their identity as Negro citizens and role models for their communities overrode their identity as educators. When “democratic objectives” were involved, blacks could not risk appearing as traitors to the very

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<sup>46</sup> Willard E. Gandy, “Implications of Integration for the Southern Teacher,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 193.

<sup>47</sup> *It Was the Right And Moral Thing To Do*, official statement adopted at the Conference of Southern Negro Educators, Hot Springs, Arkansas, October 27, 1954.



ideals they championed but were frequently denied. Clearly not all black teachers in the South felt this way. Democratic ideals aside, teachers wanted their jobs and their paychecks. But, like most everything blacks desired, from the vote to equal opportunity, keeping their jobs, and their livelihoods, was an uphill battle that ended in disappointment and disarray.

### The Aftermath of *Brown*

The South, unlike Topeka, saw a devastating loss of teachers from the field of education following the *Brown* decision. In Topeka, the contracts of the handful of teachers brave enough to publicly express hesitation toward desegregation were not renewed. However, between 1954 and 1972 over 31,000 southern black teachers lost their jobs and thousands of principals lost theirs as well.<sup>48</sup> In addition to firing black teachers, school boards demoted black teachers for reasons of “incompetence.” School boards accomplished this by assigning teachers to different subject areas, and then claiming that these teachers could not adequately fulfill the curriculum requirements.<sup>49</sup> Just over ten years after *Brown*, the National Education Association released a Task Force study documenting the displacement of black educators. The study found that sixty-seven percent of black teachers had been demoted in 1965 alone. Furthermore, the study asserted that at least ninety-three percent of the teachers interviewed had been demoted or fired due in part, or wholly, because of desegregation efforts.<sup>50</sup> These statistics offer tangible evidence of the devastating effects desegregation had on many black lives—the very lives *Brown* had hoped to improve. The numbers stand not just for the thousands of black teachers lost and forgotten in the

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Fultz, “The Displacement of Black Educators Post-*Brown*: An Overview and Analysis,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 37.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. This information comes from the NEA’s *Report of Task Force Survey of Teacher Displacement in Seventeen States*. Thus, this information pertains more to the South and does not speak for the nation as a whole.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

system of education controlled by predominantly white school boards; they represent the thousands of role models, community leaders, and everyday heroes of black school children across the nation who were casualties of desegregation. The “backbone of both rural and urban black communities in the North and South” crumbled, creating a “sociological as well as an economic shock.”<sup>51</sup> Black teachers were treated as pawns, seen as martyrs for a greater cause. While the NAACP believed it was speaking for black communities and their desire for justice, the association squandered the voices of many black educators across the nation. Nor did the NAACP help the black community regain its voice; they gave no “guidance as to how to integrate students and certainly not how to retain and integrate African American educators and administrators.”<sup>52</sup> As further evidence of the disconnect between the NAACP and working-class blacks and teachers, the NAACP had little regard for how the *Brown* decision would affect black families and teachers, and showed no interest in helping them cope with the outcome.

### Conclusion

Perhaps Eisenhower’s prophecy from 1953 still holds some truth today. Despite widespread white backlash throughout the South and other areas of the United States, desegregation nobly tried to solve the nation’s systemic race problems. Many blacks in Topeka possessed more than an inkling of what was to come following desegregation; thus, during the first half of the twentieth century, they strove to retain their sense of community, opportunity, and dignity. The few black educators who were brave enough to publicly warn against the dash to desegregate understood the potential consequences of “separate is inherently unequal,”

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<sup>51</sup> James E. Haney, “The Effects of the Brown Decision on Black Educators.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 47, no. 1. (Winter 1978): 94-95.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

including the fierce opposition by many whites. The idealistic ruling of the Supreme Court was not ideal for many black families in 1950s' America. Black school children lost role models, confidantes, counselors, and confidence due to the failure of integration policies. In 1954 Chief Justice Earl Warren offered the now hallowed phrase, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place." Unfortunately, desegregation sometimes left no place for the very people it had hoped to include and uplift. Many black teachers suddenly found themselves with no place to teach and black students with no place to learn where they were unconditionally welcomed. Currently, over ninety percent of the teaching force in the United States is white. Furthermore, over forty percent of public schools have no teachers of color.<sup>53</sup> Many black communities, while still present physically, no longer have the sense of community they once did in an era of segregation. Poor integration policies and white backlash destroyed the pillars of infrastructure—the schools, the churches, the shops and businesses—leaving in its wake black communities with little sense of stability or leadership. Segregation in America still exists, but without the strong support systems of the segregated communities in the twentieth century, they suffer from disunity and instability. Many segregated communities today also lack the pride that black Topeka and other black communities felt in the decades leading up to the *Brown* decision. Desegregation was a long, arduous, and contested journey—one that some did not survive—yet one that continues to affect black students, communities, and the field of education over half a century later.

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<sup>53</sup> National Collaborative on Diversity in Teacher Education, "Assessment of Diversity in America's Teaching Force." (Oct. 2004).



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