

Kiwanis Club
July 8, 1959

Problems Incident to Integration in Our Schools

by

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It is frankly with some reluctance that I discuss publicly a problem so controversial and so fraught with emotion as the problem of segregation or desegregation in the Houston Public Schools. I hope that you will understand the difficulties of my discussing this problem while my employers, the Board of School Trustees, continue to study and to seek a satisfactory solution for this most vexing of problems, and while a law suit, styled Delores Ross vs. Petersen and others, is pending in the Federal District Court. It would, of course, be impossible anyway for me to provide in 20 minutes a complete and comprehensive discussion of this complicated question. It may be that a few observations concerning the education of Negroes in Houston will be of interest to Kiwanians today, however.

One of the difficulties of this problem of segregation or desegregation lies in the fact that it is an emotional problem rather than a rational problem. The basic issue has been clouded by sympathy and prejudice for or against the Southern Negro, and sympathy and prejudice for or against the Southern way of life. To understand the problem of segregation or desegregation in the schools, one must go all the way back to the War Between the States, in which the Southern States fought a courageous and honorable, but losing, war. Following this war, the defeated Confederates were subjected to the most degrading peace terms in modern history and to a bitter Reconstruction Period in which the Southern Negroes unwittingly and against their will were used as a means of punishing, humiliating, and retarding the Southern States. It was during the latter half of the nineteenth century that the "separate but equal" school system, based upon the judicial doctrine of the Plessy vs. Ferguson case, was set up in the South. Unfortunately the segregated school system provided "separate but unequal" school facilities in many instances. At one time, this may have been true even in the Houston Independent School District. I do not know. But, the fact remains that today Negro students do enjoy equal school facilities in the segregated system of the Houston Independent School District -- equal in terms of quality of instruction; equal in terms of courses offered; equal in terms of quality of school buildings and classrooms; equal in terms of equipment, of supplies, and of facilities provided; equal in terms of educational opportunities.

Chief Justice Earl Warren and his associates on the United States Supreme Court are not really familiar with the quality of education specially designed for the Negro youth that can be afforded in high schools like our Phillis Wheatley High School, Jack Yates High School, Booker T. Washington High School, Worthing High School, and Kashmere Gardens High School. I doubt if the leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People are really familiar with the dedicated work that is being done in these schools. Each of them is headed by a distinguished and experienced Negro educator as principal. These men are working conscientiously for the best interests of the boys and girls of

their schools. They are planning and administering a highly effective educational program for the boys and girls. A very high percentage of the graduates of these five high schools will go to college or university for advanced study. Many will command good jobs on the basis of the skills developed in the Vocational Education and Business Education courses taken in these schools. It is doubtful if these Negro youth could have obtained as effective an education in an integrated school. It is doubtful if there is any other high school anywhere that could provide as effective education for the Negro youth of the City of Houston as Jack Yates High School, Booker T. Washington High School, Worthing High School, Wheatley High School, and Kashmere Gardens High School. There are many school systems in other parts of the United States which are not providing as well for the educational needs of Negro children as the Houston Independent School District is. This statement would be true of many school districts which claim to be integrated. Many of these schools are not providing as effectively for the education of Negro children and youth of their cities as Houston is for the Negro students of Houston. It may well be questioned whether it would not be good to allow a little more time for this difficult transitional process in school districts like ours where the Negro student receives the full measure of his educational rights and opportunities.

There are five modern senior-high-school for Negroes in the Houston Independent School District. These buildings cost approximately \$2,000,000 each. The new Booker T. Washington building has an air-conditioned auditorium, the first one to be built in Houston. This high school, and each of the other four senior high schools for Negroes, has an excellent library, good classroom facilities, a sanitary and attractive and comfortable cafeteria and kitchen, the finest high-school physical science laboratories in the State of Texas, extensive and efficient vocational shop facilities and homemaking laboratories, and wonderful facilities for music and art. The aggregate enrollment in the Negro high schools for the school year just passed was 4,753 students. Another 7,266 junior-high-school students are enrolled in eight Negro junior high schools.

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There were 1,145 graduates of our Negro high schools this June and of this number 69.8% are planning to attend college. This is a slightly higher percentage than the 66% of white graduates from our schools who plan to attend college, and considerably higher than the percentage of high-school graduates nationwide who attend college. Seventy-one of the Negro graduates received substantial scholarships to attend college. The aggregate amount of these scholarships for Negro students was \$146,369.

In addition to the usual academic courses offered to all the students in Houston, Negro students have available to them vocational courses in the areas of Auto Mechanics, Cosmetology, Industrial Arts, Homemaking, Trade Dress Making and Trade Cooking, Vocational Agriculture, Radio and Electricity, and Trade Metals.

Negro students in Houston are receiving unusually good instruction in Mathematics, Foreign Languages, and the Sciences. The Negro teachers in Science particularly have done an excellent job. Although the test results indicate that generally the Negro students fall below the students in the white schools, some of the Negro students have made excellent grades in the city-wide testing program. For example, a year ago the highest individual test score in Physics

was made by a Negro student in one of our Negro high schools. Also, the highest test score in Chemistry was made by a Negro student in one of our Negro schools. Special "major works" classes are provided for capable students in the high schools for Negroes in order to enable the capable students to proceed at a pace based on their own ability. The laboratory facilities in Science for the Negro students in Houston are unexcelled in that all of their high schools are new and equipped with modern science equipment.

Now prejudice is a strong and insidious pressure in the emotional life of any individual. Prejudice literally means judgment before the facts. Webster's New International Dictionary defines prejudice as "preconceived judgment or opinion; leaning toward one side of a question from other considerations than those belonging to it; prepossession; unreasonable predilection for, or objection against, anything; especially an opinion or leaning adverse to anything without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge."

The insidious part about prejudice is that it is difficult for the person affected by the prejudice to recognize the nature of his own prejudice. When one is controlled by prejudice, he makes certain decisions on the basis of emotions rather than on the basis of reasoning. In the segregation question, prejudices exist on both sides. Some Negroes and some who are agitating for quick integration manifest strong prejudices against whites. This is unfortunate.

It helps anyone if he can recognize his prejudices. For instances, I admit that I am deeply and severely prejudiced against the University of Oklahoma Sooners. The reason for my prejudice is clear. I spent five miserable, hot, sweaty, humiliating October Saturday afternoons in the Cotton Bowl at Dallas suffering as the University of Oklahoma defeated, one way or another, my beloved Texas Longhorns. One year the Longhorns scored early, played a wonderful game, led most of the game, but lost at the end by a close score. Another year they were swept along by a tidal wave of Oklahoma power, mostly in the form of lads of Breckenridge, Texas, Stamford, Texas, and from New Mexico. In this game the score was 45 - 0, and in the last few minutes a Texas back tried to punt on last down from deep in his own territory and just dropped the ball on the ground. All of these things occurred while I lived just a few miles from the Red River and was surrounded by neighbors and associates who saw nothing wrong in a good Texan's attending Oklahoma University. Three members of my school board in Amarillo were from the University of Oklahoma. I had to sit at the head table at the Amarillo High School football banquet and hear Bud Wilkinson claim that he didn't proselyte or recruit Texas boys for his teams. "They just simply want to attend a good university," he said. He had the nerve to say that. Can you understand why I would develop a prejudice against the Oklahoma Sooners?

The nice part about my prejudice against the Oklahoma Sooners is that several more glorious and decisive victories like the Longhorns' triumphant, crushing, and thorough win, 15- 14, last year, will resolve my prejudice. You see, I used to be prejudiced against the Texas Aggies, but I have nothing but good will now for those lovable, tame, well-disciplined boys from the farm.

Unfortunately prejudices about Negroes are not as simple, as light, or as easily resolved as those football rivalries.

Negroes are accorded more rights and privileges, more opportunities in the South today than ever before. In the Houston Public Schools, schools for Negro pupils receive the same priority as schools for whites, and justly so. Negro teachers are paid on the same salary scale as white teachers. Library books, equipment and supplies are allocated on the same basis to all schools. Supervisory help is provided more intensively for Negroes than for whites in order to assure that opportunities shall be at least equal for them. Unfortunately, all the talk about possible desegregation, the ruthless force of the United States Supreme Court decision, and the pressure of lawsuits and of intervention by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People -- these have intensified bitterness between the races. Although school officials continue to deal dispassionately, fairly, and impartially with all, regardless of color, it pains me to hear bitter, emotional tirades from all sides. The white person who criticizes the Negro does not help the situation. Neither does the agitator who speaks of forcing the majority to the will of the minority, or who ridicules the careful efforts of those in authority to comply with both federal and state law.

It is important for business and professional men, parents, and other taxpayers to understand the unique position in which members of the Board of School Trustees are placed as responsible representatives of the entire Houston Independent School District. In this situation there is no action they can take that will be universally applauded or accepted by all segments of the population of the School District. They are not free to do just whatever they desire to do. They are bound by federal law, state law, school regulations and their all-consuming concern for the education and welfare of over 160,000 boys and girls of all races.

It is extremely important that if and when desegregation occurs, it should occur gradually. In such a situation, many believe that every effort should be made to insure that there would remain some schools where white students can attend school solely with other white students and other schools where Negro students can attend school solely with Negro students. There are indications that the great majority of Negro students will prefer to remain in their present excellent schools and that the great majority of white students will prefer to remain in schools attended solely by white students.

On May 17, 1954, according to the Court, "separate but equal" ceased to be law; the invalidity of state-enforced racial segregation in the public schools became the "law of the Land". Then the implementing decision was handed down on May 31, 1955.

Basic to the Court's opinion was a recognition of the wide variety of local school problems involved. Because of this the Federal district courts were told to look at the integration plans separately submitted by the authorities of each school district against which enforcement actions should be brought, not to achieve uniformity but rather to achieve good faith implementation of the desegregation principle as applied to local facts. "Equitable principles," traditionally characterized by practical flexibility and by a facility for adjusting and reconciling public and private needs, were to be the guide. The Court called for a "prompt and reasonable start" toward compliance with the new constitutional requirement, to be then carried out "with all deliberate speed." Federal district courts were to retain jurisdiction of cases before them throughout the implementation process, as a check upon compliance.

Federal District Judge J. Skelly Wright filed the following opinion February 15, 1955, in re Orleans Parish School Board, which expresses well the nature of the problem:

"The Supreme Court, in ordering equitable relief in these cases, has decreed that the varied school problems be considered in each case. The problems attendant to desegregation in the deep South are considerably more serious than generally appreciated in some sections of our country.

"The problem of changing a people's mores, particularly those with an emotional overlay, is not to be taken lightly. It is a problem which will require the utmost patience, understanding, generosity and forbearance and from all of us of whatever race.

"But the magnitude of the problem may not nullify the principle. And the principle is that we are, all of us, free-born Americans with a right to make our way unfettered by sanctions imposed by man because of the work of God."

The important right sought by Negro plaintiffs in the segregation suits is the right to attend a school which is not inferior in quality of instruction, quality of building and facilities, quality of educational opportunity. Negroes in the Houston Independent School District already have this right. They have the right to attend schools planned and designed for their best interests -- schools which provide them excellent educational opportunities and the quality of preparation which will prepare them for admission to college or university. Another right claimed by the plaintiffs is the right to attend the school nearest their home, thus to avoid geographical inconvenience. It is true that five senior high schools for Negroes cannot provide the geographical convenience that ten senior high schools for white students in the same geographical school district can provide. On the other hand, one of the plaintiffs in the Houston segregation case now pending in Federal District Court, Beneva Williams, filed suit in 1956 to seek the right to attend McReynolds Junior High School, within 7 blocks of her home, instead of E. O. Smith Junior High School for colored students, located 20 blocks from her home.

In the meantime, she has been promoted from junior high school to senior high school. She now attends Phillis Wheatley Senior High School, which is only 12 blocks from her home.

The senior high schools for white students which are nearest to the Williams' residence are Jefferson Davis High School, 3.5 miles from her home; Stephen F. Austin Senior High School, 3.7 miles from her home; and Milby Senior High School, 5.25 miles from her home.

The plea of geographical distance can hardly justify Beneva Williams' plea in the segregation suit.

She turns, then, to another point, that a student should not be barred from a public school because of racial discrimination. She claims that she should have the right to attend Davis or Milby or Austin High School, whether it would be convenient or better, or not. This is the plea on the basis of prejudice.

The Board of School Trustees in an effort to comply with state law, as well as federal law, has invited the qualified voters of the School District to petition for a referendum election on the question of whether any desegregation should be accomplished in the Houston Independent School District. Such an election is required by state law before segregation and cannot be called without a petition signed by 20 per cent of the qualified voters. The statute requiring this election has not been ruled unconstitutional by any court, state or federal. The statute provides that if desegregation is accomplished without such an election, state financial support for the educational program will be withdrawn. Such withdrawal of state financial support would be disastrous to the Houston Independent Schools. We have asked the public to petition the Board for the referendum election in an orderly and statutory way. One of the best and first things that public-spirited citizens can do today is to encourage the signing of petitions to call this referendum election. One of the best things that public-spirited citizens can do in the future is to encourage a level-headed, moderate, unemotional approach to this difficult problem that has so much to do with the future of our great City of Houston. It is important not only to maintain a level head in the face of serious emotional complications, but also to encourage others to be courteous and considerate and unprejudiced in the face of these problems. The basic need is that all boys and girls need a sound education. Let us cooperate and keep calm in all circumstances, so that the effective educational processes of the Houston Independent School District will not be interrupted or impaired.