

With Deliberate Speed: North Carolina and School Desegregation

By Jefferson Currie II

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In the 1800s and early 1900s, North Carolina schools were segregated by race, meaning that black, Indian, and white children went to separate schools for their own race. Although the United States Supreme Court (in the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*) and the North Carolina legislature had declared that separate education must be equal, it usually was not. Many black and Indian students during the early 1900s remember receiving old, outdated textbooks that white students had used for many years. Black and Indian teachers earned salaries that were routinely lower than the ones white teachers received. The system of segregation, of which education was only a part, caused Lumbee Indian Curt Locklear to feel inferior to whites—a feeling that, he said, was something that “you were born with . . . you were reared with.” Although this system had existed since the foundation of North Carolina’s public education system in the 1800s, the United States Supreme Court in 1954 ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that school segregation was unconstitutional and must end.

After the Supreme Court ruling, North Carolina had to desegregate its schools. But many white people in the state, as well as some African Americans and American Indians, strongly opposed desegregation. Instead of quickly integrating the schools and educating students of all races together, North Carolina leaders—mostly whites—decided to study the situation and find a way to avoid true integration. In 1954 Governor William B. Umstead created the Governor’s Special Advisory Committee on Education to consider the effects of the state’s obeying the Supreme Court ruling. The bi-racial (black and white) committee reported to the legislature that desegregation “throughout the state cannot be accomplished and should not be attempted.”

Luther Hodges became governor in 1955, and although he opposed desegregation, he ordered a new committee to study the issue, because the United States Supreme Court had ruled that desegregation must happen “with all deliberate speed.” This new committee established the Pearsall Plan, named after the group’s chairman, Thomas J. Pearsall. The new Pearsall Plan began a system of local—not state—control, freedom of choice, and vouchers. The freedom-of-choice system allowed students to attend the school they wanted, and the voucher system allowed parents to use state money to support their child’s education in a private school. In effect, the Pearsall Plan did little to integrate North Carolina’s public schools. With a few exceptions, such as in Greensboro’s schools, most schools in North Carolina remained segregated.

Within the system of segregation, members of the Haliwa-Saponi Indian community had struggled for many years to establish a school for their children. The Indian students had no school to attend, because in Halifax and Warren counties, where the Haliwa-Saponi lived, there were only two school systems—one for black students and

one for white students. The Pearsall Plan allowed the Indian community to use state money to establish a private Indian school in Warren County in 1957. Eventually, the county made the school public. The Indian school existed until 1965, when all Warren County schools integrated.

A federal court later ruled the Pearsall Plan unconstitutional, and the state assumed control over local school districts. By this time, schools in North Carolina had begun to desegregate. But numerous school systems had not integrated. The United States Supreme Court in 1971 upheld a decision that declared that the Charlotte school system must desegregate, and, if necessary, it must bus students to schools outside their communities to achieve integration. After this decision, public schools throughout North Carolina began busing students in order to desegregate fully. By the 1971–1972 school year, North Carolina finally had met the requirements of the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision satisfactorily.

African Americans and American Indians often disagreed on whether integration was the best thing for their communities. The majority of African American communities supported the desegregation of schools, but within the Lumbee/Tuscarora Indian community of Robeson County, many people felt that Indians could better maintain their culture and small communities if they controlled the schools that their children attended. Former Indian school principal Danford Dial noted that many Indians also resented having to attend schools with whites who had mistreated them. He said that Indians “had been driven out of the cafés and driven out of the drugstores, at the soda fountains and ice-cream counter, and hadn’t been served in all these years, and now they’re trying to make us go to school with these people.” Although many individuals in the Lumbee/Tuscarora community actively fought the loss of their schools, eventually Robeson County desegregated as well.

Although the hard-fought struggles of the past achieved the integration of schools in North Carolina, today many people think that racial groups are beginning to segregate themselves in schools again by choice. With culturally specific charter schools, and the end of mandatory busing to achieve integration, schools in many communities are becoming predominantly black, Hispanic, Indian, or white. While the situation continues to change across the state, North Carolina will never again move to a system of forced segregation. As former United States president James A. Garfield said, “Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained.”

At the time of this article’s publication, Jefferson Currie worked in the curation section at the North Carolina Museum of History.