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**ABSTRACT**

The decline of public confidence in Washington, D.C. public schools emerged between 1954 and 1967 from political and social developments that affected the nation's capital. Past research and educational reports, newspaper articles, and politicians' statements indicate that before 1954, public confidence in the schools was relatively high. Educational problems became a public issue only after World War II and were perceived as critical only after desegregation in 1954. By the middle 1960s, much of the attention focused on public schools arose from increasing concern with academic achievement as an indicator of quality, along with such developments as the worsening of actual school conditions, widespread racial prejudice, accelerated public expectations of the schools because of the civil rights movement, and desegregation. Test scores were used to support arguments of segregationists, integrationists, and various activist groups. The public schools' poor image was worsened by incorrect press reports of a trend toward private schools among the middle class, and by the general unpopularity of the Board of Education. After 1975, with the advent of competency-based curriculum under superintendent Vincent Reed, scores did begin to rise, and Reed became the first superintendent in years to remain popular with the press and public. In the 1980s it is important to realize that improvement in student achievement alone will not improve the public school image. Efforts must be made to change public attitudes, to develop measures other than test scores alone as measures of student achievement, and to maintain a new awareness of public schools' vulnerability to negative publicity. (Author/MJL)

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**CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE:  
THE REPUTATION OF WASHINGTON'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

BY

**STEVEN J. DINER**

**CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF URBAN STUDIES  
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UD 022 298

## THE D.C. HISTORY AND PUBLIC POLICY PROJECT

THE D.C. HISTORY AND PUBLIC POLICY PROJECT seeks to provide historical research on critical public policy issues in the District of Columbia in a form useful to policymakers in this city and the general public concerned with policy issues. During the 1981-82 academic year, the project has examined Public Education. In addition to preparing these papers, the project conducts seminars for the Mayor, the City Council, the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education based on its research, and also holds a public conference.

The project is an undertaking of the Department of Urban Studies (College of Liberal and Fine Arts) and the Institute for District Affairs of the UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA. It is funded by a grant from the NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES.

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IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

by

**Steven J. Diner**  
Chair, Department of Urban Studies  
University of the District of Columbia

May, 1982

Studies In D.C. History and Public Policy

Paper No. 1

This paper is part of a series of historical studies on the public schools of the District of Columbia prepared by the staff of the **D.C. HISTORY AND PUBLIC POLICY PROJECT**, an undertaking of the Department of Urban Studies (College of Liberal and Fine Arts) and the Institute for District Affairs of the **UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**, funded by a grant from the **NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES**.

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## SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The crisis of confidence which plagues Washington's public schools today emerged between 1954 and 1967 as a result of the politicization of education in the wake of school desegregation, the civil rights movement, the struggle for home rule and the advent of a black majority in the nation's capital. Although objective problems in the schools account for much of the loss of confidence, the politicization of education has greatly raised public expectations of the schools, and these rising expectations have much to do with declining confidence.

Before 1945, schools were measured by what was put into them — facilities, curriculum, teaching staff, etc. — but not by student achievement. There is ample evidence in teachers' journals and other sources of serious educational problems in the school system. Teachers complained in the 1920s and 1930s about the collapse of standards and about high school students who could not read, and standardized test scores confirmed the educational problems in both the black and the white divisions. These problems of student achievement were not yet a public issue, however, and the daily press never reported test scores. A 1928 survey of the District's schools by the U.S. Bureau of Efficiency devoted two hundred pages to facilities, budget and staff, for example, but dismissed student achievement in a single paragraph.

Between 1945 and the desegregation of the schools in 1954, the press and public officials began to show greater concern with the educational problems of the schools, but student scores on standardized tests still were not reported in the press. A 1949 study of the schools by Professor George Strayer of Columbia University documented problems of student achievement, but these findings were buried in a massive report which emphasized facilities and administrative and budgetary issues.

After desegregation, however, student achievement immediately became the primary issue in public education. Segregationists on capitol hill pointed to low test scores to discredit integration. Integrationists argued instead that the scores were low because of the inadequacies of the black schools under segregation, and promised to bring the scores up to national levels within five years. The press now reported test scores on a regular basis. By the middle 1960s, when it became clear that student achievement in the District schools fell far below national norms, various groups advocating change in the schools started to criticize the quality of education, and these attacks reinforced the image of a school system in trouble. Activists also attacked the appointed Board of Education as the struggle for home rule became more militant. The press incorrectly began to report a "trend" toward private schools among the middle class, even though the percentage of District school age children attending private schools since the 1960s has remained substantially below what it was before desegregation. The Passow Report of 1967, unlike the earlier studies of the schools, made student achievement its central concern, and Judge Wright, in issuing a sweeping decree against the "tracking system" and de facto segregation in the D.C. schools in that same year likewise used poor student achievement among low income black students as evidence of discrimination.

The advent of the elected Board of Education in 1969 did not appreciably alter the poor public image of the schools, partly because the Board itself often behaved in an acrimonious way, partly because a series of superintendents and new initiatives raised and then quickly dashed hopes for improvement, and partly because student test scores remained low. After 1975, with the advent of the Competency-Based Curriculum under the superintendency of Vincent Reed, scores did begin to rise. Reed became the first superintendent in years to remain popular with the press and the public, but ironically he was unable to transfer his personal popularity to the schools.

This paper concludes that improvements in student achievement alone will not improve the schools' image, and that a concerted public relations effort is also needed. It argues that school officials need to counter the tendency to exaggerate the quality of schools in the past and underestimate past problems. It also suggests that although the schools cannot abandon norm-referenced tests as a prime measure of student achievement, they need to convince the public that there are other measures as well. Finally, the paper calls upon education officials to recognize the special vulnerability of public schools to adverse publicity, and the absence of press and public scrutiny of private and parochial schools.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### The Problem of Reputation

The public schools of the District of Columbia for some time now have been losing public confidence. It does not matter that scores on standardized tests in math and verbal ability are rising. It does not matter that a competency-based curriculum, designed to guarantee that students acquire critical skills in each grade, is in place in all elementary schools and moves to the upper grades next year. It does not matter that, after years of turmoil the system has been administratively stable for the last six years. It does not matter that district schools have some of the most highly organized and involved parents in the nation, or that local supporters of public education have been extremely successful lately in securing a larger share of city funds at a time of financial stringency. For whatever their real achievements in recent years it seems that D.C. public schools have been unable to reverse their negative image.

This is neither new nor peculiar to the District. For nearly three decades now — since desegregation in 1954 — journalists, researchers, activists and politicians have described the schools here as a system in crisis. Some highlights: In 1955, the Post published a three-part editorial on school needs, the first part under the headline "Crisis in the Schools." In 1956, The Washington Star published a twelve-part series entitled "Crisis in the Schools." In 1963, U.S. News and World Report published an interview with D.C. School Superintendent Carl Hansen under the heading "School Crisis in the Nation's Capital." In 1967, an editorial in the Washington Post began with the statement, "The collapse of public education in Washington is now evident.<sup>1/</sup> In that same year Professor A. Harry Passow delivered a lengthy report on the D.C. school system which confirmed "the general impressions that many professionals and lay

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1/ Washington Post, November 23, 1955 and April 18, 1967 (hereafter cited as Post); Washington Star, March 4—March 16, 1956 (hereafter cited as Star); "School Crisis in the Nation's Capital," U.S. News and World Report, 54 (March 11, 1963), pp. 62-68.

citizens have about education in the District as presently organized and operated: the schools are not adequate to the task of providing quality education for the District's children." <sup>2/</sup> And a few weeks earlier, Judge J. Skelly Wright in his opinion in the case of Hobson v. Hansen called the D.C. public schools "a monument to the cynicism of the power structure that governs the voteless capital ..." <sup>3/</sup> In 1970, the Post published still another editorial entitled "Schools in Crisis," stating that the "system is on the verge of demoralization ...." When Barbara Sizemore was appointed superintendent in 1973, she stated that she would attempt to deal immediately with the "crisis of confidence" in the schools. <sup>4/</sup>

Public opinion polls confirmed the falling reputation of the schools. In 1946, the Post asked a sample of District residents if they were satisfied with the school their children went to, and 89% answered in the affirmative. Eighty two percent also said that they thought the teachers in their children's school did their job well, and sixty six percent, when asked what criticisms they had of the schools answered that they had none. By contrast, in 1973, in a survey conducted by the Bureau of Social Science Research, only twenty eight percent of D.C. citizens polled rated the public schools "very good" or "good." When the Bureau asked the same question two years later, only eighteen percent of District residents gave the schools a rating of "very good" or "good." <sup>5/</sup>

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- 2/ A. Harry Passow, Toward Creating A Model Urban School System: A Study of the Washington D.C. Public Schools (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University 1967), p. 2. (Hereafter cited as Passow Report.)
  - 3/ U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, Hobson v. Hansen: Opinion by Honorable J. Skelly Wright, Judge, 260 Federal Supplement, p. 407. (Hereafter cited as Hobson v. Hansen.)
  - 4/ Post, January 28, 1970, May 12, 1974.
  - 5/ Post, October 28, 1946; Albert E. Gollin and Mary Eileen Dixon, Social Patterns and Attitudes in Greater Washington 1973/1975: A Social Indicators Sourcebook (Washington: Bureau of Social Science Research, 1975), pp. 118-120.

To be sure, the declining reputation of public schools is a national phenomenon. For thirteen years now the Gallup organization has polled Americans on their attitude toward public schools. When asked to assign a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F), eighteen percent gave the schools an 'A' in 1974, only nine percent in 1981. Conversely, only six percent gave the schools a 'D' in 1974, compared with 13% in 1981. <sup>6/</sup> Still, the reputational problems of the District public schools have been much more severe and are of longer standing than those of public schools nationally. The seriousness of the school reputation problem here cannot be written off as simply part of a national problem.

The problem of school image is important for several reasons. Although a negative reputation usually arises from negative conditions, once it takes hold a negative reputation further damages actual conditions and become itself an impediment to improvement. It discourages those who have a choice from enrolling their children in the public schools. It is these middle class parents with choices who have traditionally provided the backbone of public support for the schools. When they leave for the suburban school systems or for the private schools, the public schools are that much worse off.

Moreover, the schools' negative image erodes political support for them and encourages proposals like tuition tax credits and vouchers put forward by people who frankly admit that they have given up on public education. In the recent debate in Washington over the unsuccessful Education Tax Credit initiative, a highly respected

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6/ "The 13th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan, 63 (September 1981), p. 36.

expert in school finance argued in the Post that Washington's public schools were schools of "last resort" and that those who remain in them are "the sons and daughters of idealists or those who have no other choice." <sup>7/</sup> The overwhelming defeat of the tax credit initiative can hardly be interpreted as a vote of confidence in the public schools. The proposal on the ballot so grossly favored the rich at the expense of the poor and threatened such a massive drain on the city treasury that it was opposed by nearly every segment of the community. But the schools' image problem remains, and it invites new political attacks on public education here.

Perhaps the most severe effects of the negative publicity and poor reputation of the schools is on the teachers and the children. The morale of teachers who are constantly hearing about how bad a job they are supposedly doing must suffer, and low morale inevitably affects their performance. And what of the children themselves? In 1970, Benjamin Henley, who was then Acting Superintendent of Schools, told a group of concerned citizens, "How can you expect kids to want to go to school when everybody is telling them how bad the schools are?" <sup>8/</sup>

The history of public education in the District shows that, despite serious shortcomings throughout, only since desegregation of the school system in 1954 has widespread disaffection with the quality of education been reflected in the mass media. Before the 1950's, an occasional school issue might capture front page headlines for awhile — legislation regulating teacher tenure and appointment procedures, accusations

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7/ Dennis P. Doyle "Tuition Credit: A Blow at Monopoly," Post, October 29, 1981.

8/ D.C. League of Women Voters, "Inside Fourteen City Schools: A Search for the Positive," 1970, in League of Women Voters Papers, Washingtoniana Collection, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. (Hereafter cited as LWV Papers.)

of Communist influence in the schools, or proposals to change the manner in which the Board of Education was selected, for example. With desegregation, however, public education itself became a political issue, and the quality of instruction, the qualifications of teachers, and the performance of students became prime news concerns. For two decades the media dutifully reported protest and upheaval in the school system. The public, witnessing major political struggles over the schools, was constantly reminded of the schools' failures.

This intense public awareness of the schools' shortcomings has caused many people to assume that schools today compare unfavorably with both the black and the white schools before desegregation. Former D.C. school board president Anita Allen expressed this view in an article in 1973. "I attended public school in the District of Columbia during the pre-1954 era of legal school segregation," she wrote.

The schools were "separate" and not "equal," but many of them and certainly the best of them were far superior to most public schools currently in operation in the District.<sup>9/</sup>

Howard University law professor Herbert O. Reid expressed the same view in an interview with a Post reporter in 1979. ". . . I know damn well that education in the public schools is worse than it was in 1954. 'We didn't have people coming out of high school then who couldn't read . . .,'" he said.<sup>10/</sup> A "third generation Washingtonian and a product of the D.C. school system" wrote an article for the Post in 1980 stating that, "Twenty years ago, the system certainly was not in the mess that it finds itself in

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9/ Anita F. Allen, "The Politics of Urban Education," in James Haskins, ed., Black Manifesto for Education (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973), p. 58.

10/ Quoted in Juan Williams, "Puzzling Legacy of 1954," Post, May 17, 1979.

today." Admitting that there were many problems back then, he nonetheless argued that "there was a strong sense of purpose, sustained by performance, and a belief that academic achievement was not only important, but attainable." <sup>11/</sup> Another native Washingtonian and product of the school system, teachers' union president William Simons, stated in a recent interview that although the black schools before desegregation were grossly unequal, that community influences then were more positive and that black schools under segregation did a good job. <sup>12/</sup>

Attitudes like these are based upon a collective historical memory which may be flawed or just incomplete. Our frustration over the real problems of our schools today has caused us to idealize the schools of the past and to overstate their achievements. If the schools of the District are to regain public confidence, they must find ways to reverse their negative image. This requires that they actually improve the performance of students, but it also requires that they develop systematic strategies for reversing the negative picture people hold of the schools. This paper seeks to examine the way in which the "crisis of confidence" developed, the reasons for it and the lessons to be learned. It also examines critically the widely held view that the schools of yesterday were superior to the schools of today, and seeks to place that view in historical perspective.

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11/ Edward C. Smith, "Better School, Better Students," Post, July 19, 1980.

12/ Interview with William Simons, September 11, 1981.

Problems Without Crisis:

The Schools Before 1945

In 1928, the U.S Bureau of Efficiency presented a Senate committee with a comprehensive survey of the Washington D.C. public school system, the first of many such weighty documents which would periodically appear throughout the next several decades. Weighing in at only 208 pages, this pioneer effort appears modest by later standards. Nonetheless, it presented detailed analyses of school governance, buildings and grounds, equipment, health and safety, business management, student-teacher ratios, teacher salaries and personnel procedures, and such workaday matters as the ideal ratio of toilets in school buildings to children ("The standard for girls' toilets is 1 seat to 15 girls. Sixty one schools out of 148 meet this standard").<sup>13/</sup> Buried in the five page discussion of "Curriculum and Efficiency of Instruction" was the following statement:

"With reference to the efficiency of the teaching staff, no attempt was made either to rate the teachers at work or to measure results as shown by the accomplishment of the children. These are educational problems requiring a specialized technique, and the limitations of time did not permit of an exhaustive analysis of this sort even if we had considered it necessary."<sup>14/</sup>

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13/ U.S. Bureau of Efficiency, Report on Survey of the Public School System of the District of Columbia (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928), p. 204.

14/ Ibid., p. 97.

Looking back, the failure to examine student achievement seems incredible. Yet it reveals dramatically the profound differences in the criteria applied then and how to evaluate schools. Before 1945, both in Washington and nationally, schools were judged by what was put into them — by facilities and equipment, teacher-student ratios, administrative and supervisory systems, the curriculum, the qualifications of teachers, and the like. Schools were not judged, as they are today, by their outcomes, that is, by what their students knew and could do when they left school.

Therefore, throughout the first half of the century, when parents, citizen groups, the press and political officials looked at the schools, they remained upbeat about overall educational quality even as they pointed to specific and sometimes severe deficiencies. A staff study prepared for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Advisory Committee on Education concluded in 1938 that "The District of Columbia maintains a school system which compares favorably with schools systems in other cities of comparable size" and that "many features of the best systems are found in the District, but others are lacking ...." <sup>15/</sup> The authors devoted only one of the report's seven chapters to the "Organization of the Educational Program," and nowhere discussed student achievement. Their concluding chapter on "Principal Problems" cited only matters involving the budget and the authority of the Board of Education. <sup>16/</sup>

Similarly, in 1942 the League of Women Voters put out a Handbook of Information About the District of Columbia Public Schools. The League organized the handbook as a series of answers to questions about the schools — how many children have we to

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15/ Lloyd E. Blanch and J. Orin Powers, Public Education in the District of Columbia. Staff Study No. 15, The Advisory Committee on Education (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1938), p. 45.

16/ Ibid., Chapters 5 and 8.

educate?, how many teachers does the school system employ?, are our schools adequately equipped?, etc. -- but nowhere did the authors ask, how much are our students learning or how well are our teachers teaching? The concluding section posed the question, "what are the chief weaknesses of our school system?," and answered that "the fundamental weaknesses in our present educational system arise chiefly from the particular relationships existing between the Board of Education on the one hand, and Congress and the District Board of Commissioners on the other."<sup>17/</sup>

In 1944, a graduate student at American University completed a doctoral dissertation on the subject, "The Development of Public Education for Negroes in Washington, D.C.: 'A Study of Separate But Equal Accommodations'." Through detailed analyses of facilities, equipment, student/teacher ratios and appropriations, he showed that the black schools had rarely been treated equally, and suggested that "an investigation of the tortuous path along which the colored schools have advanced raises doubts as to the feasibility of racial separation ...."<sup>18/</sup> The argument is strikingly similar to that made by Judge Wright twenty three years later in his 1967 decision in the Hobson v. Hansen case. There is one major difference however. Judge Wright cited differences in student achievement, measured by test scores, as evidence of inequality. Lofton, like everyone else at that time, pointed only to inputs, ignoring measures of student achievement.

In short, in the four decades before the end of World War II, public confidence in the schools of the District remained high. There were numerous political battles over school funding, teacher salaries, construction and governance of education, but the

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17/ D.C. League of Women Voters, A Handbook of Information About the District of Columbia Schools (September 1942), copy in LWV Papers.

18/ Williston H. Lofton, "The Development of Public Education for Negroes in the Washington, D.C.: 'A Study of Separate But Equal Accommodations'." (PhD Dissertation: American University, 1944), p. 238.

viability of the educational system itself never came into question. The daily press reported and wrote editorials about these political skirmishes as they arose, but the number of articles on these subjects stayed small in comparison to the number on such subjects as the military cadet program in the high schools or about the activities of students or teachers in particular schools. The daily press ignored almost completely the black schools but reports on their activities appeared in black newspapers like The Tribune and The Afro-American.

A spate of articles appeared in the daily press in 1923 and 1924, when Superintendent Frank Ballou instituted intelligence testing in both school systems. The tests aroused considerable parental anxiety and were initially controversial.<sup>19/</sup> Although the newly created research departments soon started to give standardized achievement tests too, the results of these tests were not reported in the press or publicly discussed very much. The fact that these tests were given was thought to show that the schools were up to date. Their results were not a public concern, because the achievement of students was not yet a political issue.

The lack of public attention to student achievement did not stem from the absence of achievement problems. The professional publications of the various teachers' associations, and an occasional newspaper article, reveal evidence of the kind of educational problems that today receive so much publicity. As early as 1914, a committee of the white High School Teachers Association met with the superintendent to discuss "the graduation of pupils in spite of deficiencies," and he agreed that

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19/ William G. Handorf, "An Historical Study of the Superintendency of Dr. Frank W. Ballou in the Public School System of the District of Columbia, 1920-1943," (DEd Dissertation: American University, 1962), pp. 293-303. See also clipping file on "Public Schools - Mental Tests, 1923-1965", in Washingtoniana Collection.

"requirements for graduation would be standardized." <sup>20/</sup> In 1924, in the midst of the controversy surrounding the introduction of intelligence tests, an angry parent complained in a letter to a Board of Education member:

The whole trouble is this: The public schools of Washington ... desire the help of the parents when the salaries of teachers are to be raised or when something is to be put over by the school board, but when it comes to what is best for the children the parents are not considered ... I think next year I shall take my daughter out of the public schools for the reason that I cannot there get the attention that I feel she should have."<sup>21/</sup>

In 1926, a white D.C. high school teacher complained that "it is scarcely too much to say that the modern school — at least the high school — is being transformed from an educational institution into an entertainment bureau or amusement place." More and more, she complained, the teacher is "asked to assume the responsibility of the parent."

A mother, asked to cooperate in getting her daughter to school on time, responded, "Why can't the school do it?" Another parent complained, "Dick has been to a dance or entertainment every night during the Christmas holidays. Can't you teachers do something to keep the boys at home?" <sup>22/</sup>

In 1935 an editorial in The District Teacher, the organ of the white Teachers Union, complained about diagnostic testing in the junior and senior high schools. "Undoubtedly pupils do enter the junior high school with a third grade reading ability; the teachers know that without testing." The editorial objected to the fact that

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20/ "Report of the Committee on School Administration," Bulletin of the High School Teacher's Association (May 1914), p. 3 (Hereafter cited as BHSTA.)

21/ Star, July 30, 1924.

22/ Bertha Lee Gardner, "What is the Matter With Teaching?" BHSTA, XVIII, 1 (June 1926), p. 5.

"No courses of study were remade as a result of the tests, nor were any remedial teachers appointed or transferred to correct weaknesses found." <sup>23/</sup> Six months later, another editorial in the same journal called for "classes in remedial reading ... at all levels: elementary, junior high, and senior high." <sup>24/</sup>

In November 1939, the assistant superintendent in charge of buildings for the white schools reported a critical problem of school vandalism:

The increasing trend in the disrespect of public property, unlawful entry of schools, theft, loitering and rowdiness has reached a point where prompt and determined action must be taken ... I am strongly of the opinion that the schools are being subjected to conditions that interfere with the educational program, cause embarrassment to school officers and teachers, and increase the cost of operation.

The board at this same meeting voted to ask the commissioners for police protection for the schools. <sup>25/</sup>

An English teacher at white Gordon Junior High School reported in 1940 that of twenty eight students in her previous year's eighth grade class, three read at the fourth grade level, five at the fifth grade, thirteen at the sixth grade, six at the seventh grade and only one at the eighth grade level. <sup>26/</sup> Two years later, Jessie La Salle, Associate Superintendent in charge of research for the white divisions admitted that "Recent surveys, not only in our local public schools, but in other cities would indicate that we are not realizing the educational objective of gaining skills in the tool subjects." <sup>27/</sup> Reporting on another study of reading and arithmetic achievement of high school

23/ District Teacher, 6, 2 (December 1935), p. 18.

24/ "Remedial Reading," Ibid., 6, 4 (June 1936), p. 18.

25/ "Vandalism in the City's Schools," Ibid., 9, 6 (December 1939), p. 18.

26/ Elizabeth Kohl Draper, "Encouraging the Below Grade Reader," Journal of the Education Association of the District of Columbia, 10, 1 (October 1940), p. 18. (Hereafter cited as JEADC.)

27/ Jessie La Salle, "Forward," Ibid., 12, 2 (1942), p. 2.

students, this one in 1944, La Salle stated that "we have with us a problem of pupils inadequately prepared to meet the every day problems of life, so far as the use of simple arithmetic is concerned." The chairman of the educational committee of the High School Teachers Association, after citing La Salle's study, stated that "much is being written now concerning the collapse of standards," and indicated that "the present tendency ... is toward a greater emphasis on the basic skills in listening, reading, speaking, writing and thinking." Particularly interesting, in light of today's commitment to a competency-based curriculum, is the first recommendation of her committee: "The establishment of clearly defined mastery goals on each grade level ...." <sup>28/</sup>

There is little doubt that both D.C. school systems faced serious achievement problems before the end of World War II, and that in the late 1930's and during the war things were getting worse. It was only after the war, however, that the educational problems of the D.C. schools began to become a public issue, and it was not until after desegregation in 1954 that these problems came to be seen as a "crisis."

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28/ Edna May Davisson, "Adjusting Our Schools to Post-War Needs," BHSTA, 37, 1 (August 1945), pp. 3-7.

## Moving Toward Crisis,

1945 — 1954

The decade between the end of World War II and the end of Washington's dual school system witnessed a growing interest in Washington's public schools. Three interconnected social trends helped focus attention on the schools: a rapid increase in total school enrollment after the war, a steady increase in the black proportion of the enrollment and the growth of a civil rights movement which effectively challenged legal segregation in Washington.

The black proportion of the total enrollment in the D.C. public schools increased modestly but steadily throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In 1923 it was 31.4%; by 1939 it was 38%. Until 1935 the number of white enrollees continued to increase, albeit at a slower rate than the number of black enrollees. After that year, white enrollment in the District schools decreased every year, with the exception of slight increases in 1946, 1949 and 1953. The decline in white enrollment resulted in a decrease in total enrollment between 1937 and 1943, and the total number of children in the system did not surpass the 1937 number again until 1949.

By then the black and white proportions of total enrollment were virtually equal. The black school facilities, however, had not kept pace in the least with the growth in black enrollments, and the white schools, with steadily declining enrollments, had each year more empty seats and fewer pupils per teacher. After 1949, the increase in total enrollment was extremely rapid. Nearly 10,000 additional students, all black, had to be accommodated in the five years between 1949 and 1953.<sup>29/</sup> The inadequacy of facilities and staff for such a massive increase made education an important public concern in the post-war decade.

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29/ These figures on enrollment and others elsewhere in this paper were obtained from the Annual Statistical Reports of the D.C. Schools. For an analysis of school desegregation see, Martha Swaim, "Desegregation in the District of Columbia Schools," (Masters Thesis, Howard University, 1971.)

Moreover, the movement against segregation in other city facilities gained momentum after the war and won major victories. By 1950, there was growing public realization that the days of the dual school system were numbered. The active possibility of a single, predominantly black school system helped to focus attention on Washington's schools in Congress and in the daily press. <sup>30/</sup>

As might be expected under these circumstances, the press and the public showed concern first with the inadequacy of facilities, second, with the problems of recruiting and retaining an adequate teaching staff, and third, with the need to address the blatant inequality in facilities and staff between the white and black schools. As in the prewar years, professional educators and the public assumed the quality of education received by the students to be a function primarily of staff, facilities and other "inputs."

In September 1945, the Post ran a several part series on the postwar outlook for Washington's public schools. The lead article pointed to the basic problems of the school system: inadequate facilities made worse by the suspension of construction and most maintenance during the war, a shortage of teachers, and the likelihood of a major expansion of overall enrollments after the war. <sup>31/</sup> In March 1947, Dr. Hobart M. Corning, the new school superintendent, declared that Washington D.C. had "one of the sorriest school systems in the country," pointing to its inadequate staff, its overcrowding, its inadequate facilities, and its inferior treatment of the Negro schools. "Can it be considered economy," the Post asked in reaction to Corning's statement, "to let such conditions continue?" <sup>32/</sup>

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30/ Constance M. Green, The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital (Princeton University Press, 1967), Chapter 12.

31/ Post, September 3, 4, and 5, 1945.

32/ Ibid., March 19, 1947.

In response to the growing severity of these problems, Congress, instead of appropriating substantial sums for school construction and staff, appropriated \$100,000 for "a complete survey of the public school system of the District of Columbia with respect to the adequacy of the present plant and personnel, as well as educational methods and practices." [underlining added.] <sup>33/</sup> The massive study directed by Professor George Strayer of Teachers College, Columbia University produced a final report of 980 pages which examined most aspects of the school system, but emphasized the inadequacy of the school budget and of facilities. Its call for a hefty increase in school appropriations and a massive construction program to be paid for by long term borrowing instead of by annual appropriations caught public attention. The Star called for prompt congressional legislation "to provide some of the funds necessary to carry out the important recommendations of the report, especially those that relate to a construction program adequate to meet future demands." <sup>34/</sup> The next morning, the Post echoed the theme: "The major points of the Strayer report are scarcely open to challenge. The salaries of teachers and administrative personnel must be raised ... New school buildings must be built." <sup>35/</sup>

Education was becoming a public issue, but problems that later would loom largest in the public's loss of confidence in the schools — declining test scores, weak promotional standards, problems of student discipline — had not yet crystalized. Not that

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<sup>33/</sup> The Report of a Survey of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1949), p. III. (Hereafter cited as Strayer Report.)

<sup>34/</sup> Star, March 4, 1949.

<sup>35/</sup> Post, March 5, 1949.

these problems were absent. The third article in the Post's 1945 series was headlined "School Officials Optimistic But Truancy Remains Problem." School officials and parent leaders agreed, the writer reported, that truancy "was one of their oldest problems," and that "in the great majority of cases is not the natural outgrowth of youthful cussedness but the product of parental indifference and neglect." <sup>36/</sup> In 1946 the daily press reported arrests for sale of marijuana at the white McKinley Technical High School, and in 1951 Superintendent Corning said he was "surprised and shocked by revelations of drug addiction" at white Eastern High School. He pledged increased efforts to curb drug addiction among pupils. <sup>37/</sup> In 1947 police reported that during the 1946-47 school year, juvenile vandals broke 10,000 windows in public schools, despite a special plan to check vandalism instituted that year by the Police Juvenile Bureau. <sup>38/</sup> Yet in the Post's 1946 poll of parent criticisms of the public schools, only three percent of the sample cited lack of discipline as a problem. <sup>39/</sup> Clearly, it was not yet a public concern.

Similarly, academic achievement still was not a major issue in the postwar decade, although achievement problems had been demonstrated. A teacher at white Paul Junior High School wrote an article in the Education Association journal in 1948 on the reasons why some upper grade children in the public schools could not read. The article, "Johnny Can Read If ..." cited numerous cases of public school children who could not read and of parents therefore turning to private and parochial schools. The teacher cited as one example, a "sixteen-year-old junior high school boy" who was "unable to

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36/ Ibid., September 5, 1945

37/ Star, March 22, 1946 and July 13, 1951.

38/ Washington Daily News, August 1, 1947.

39/ Post, October 28, 1946.

read [a] street-car sign." <sup>40/</sup> (The example is remarkably similar to a moving story in the Post in 1978 about a high school student who could not read bus signs. The latter article produced a major outcry in the community; the former went largely unnoticed outside of professional circles.)

The teacher who wrote the 1948 article went on to explain the causes of the problem in her view. "Promotion to the next grade according to chronological age" and "without regard to pupils' attainment of ability to read and understand," she complained, had "been wholeheartedly received into the D.C. Schools."

I have discussed the reading situation many times with a friend, a conscientious elementary school teacher of 22 years' experience. "Years ago," she said, "we had standards. Today is another story."

Prophetically, she went on to suggest that concern about reading was becoming the "headline issue" in public education. "Parents don't want evasive excuses why Johnny can't read. They want Johnny to read," she concluded. <sup>41/</sup>

The 1949 Strayer report contained ample evidence of achievement problems. Its researchers examined student test scores and other measures of educational quality, and the chapter on elementary schools reported that "all white divisions [in 1944] were retarded in paragraph meaning and word meaning in both 3B and 3A grades and again in the same month of 1946," that spelling scores were below national norms, and that "the situation was almost as bad in arithmetic reasoning and computation." <sup>42/</sup> It found even more serious problems in the black divisions, where a downward trend in achievement

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40/ Marie Garrett, "Johnny Can Read If ...," JEADC, 17, 3 (April 1948), p. 10.

41/ Ibid., p. 11.

42/ Strayer Report, pp. 461-463.

of pupils had been occurring for ten years, a problem which the report attributed in part to "the movement of large numbers of underprivileged children into the District from areas where public education is very inefficient in the development of the fundamental tool skills." The chapter on junior and senior high schools reported that results of arithmetic tests given the eighth grade showed "nearly all [white] junior high schools were below national norms by approximately 1 year," and that "the median for all [colored] junior high schools was 2 1/2 years below norms." Furthermore in "basic language skills, and word study, average scores earned by white pupils in grade 8B ... during 1947 and 1948 were definitely below norms, in most instances by more than 2 years." <sup>43/</sup>

These assessments of student achievement took up a few pages of a document of almost a thousand pages, however, and were not highlighted in the chapter summaries. Although Strayer and his associates stated that "large numbers of pupils enter the junior high schools ill-prepared for the work on this level because of inadequate preparation in basic skills," they could nonetheless conclude that "the Washington elementary school principals and teachers have succeeded in developing a great many superior elementary schools," and that despite many problems in the secondary schools, "there is much of which to be proud."

This feeling of pride is shared in a particular way not only by the students and alumni of the schools and the parents and citizens of the District, but also by the people of the entire country who look to the institutions of their Nation's Capital to offer them leadership and to serve as examples to the whole world of the successful implementation of American ideals. <sup>44/</sup>

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43/ Ibid., pp. 552-553.

44/ Ibid., pp. 467, 537.

The daily press, its attention riveted to the issues of facilities and personnel, ignored the test scores and the issue of student achievement. The papers rarely mentioned the numerous reports on achievement produced by the schools' two research divisions and the summary of those findings in the Strayer report. The black press did show some interest in the matter, however. The Washington-Pittsburgh Courier, for example, summarized a report to the Board of Education in 1948 by the head of the black school research division showing that most grades scored below national norms and that the "situation has grown progressively worse since 1937." <sup>45/</sup>

In March of 1954, two months before the Supreme Court would declare an end to Washington's dual school system, Corning defended the schools against criticism that student achievement and school standards had declined. His comments, part of a report to the Board, were reported in the daily press:

"Some fears and doubts have been expressed about modern trends in education," Dr. Corning declared. "This is not new. Every generation has experienced that kind of criticism."

Actually, those who complain that young people "aren't well grounded in the fundamentals," the superintendent said, are merely repeating criticisms made by businessmen in 1910.

"I do not want to appear to be brushing it off," Dr. Corning said, "but this type of criticism has been perennial." <sup>46/</sup>

These and similar expressions of concern about student achievement apparently caused the Star to undertake research for a major eight-part series on "What's Wrong With Our Schools?" Research began before the Supreme Court decision, the articles appeared only twenty days after the Court struck down de jure segregation, and they

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45/ Washington-Pittsburgh Courier, October 23, 1948.

46/ Post, March 18, 1954.

did not deal with the forthcoming merger of the black and the white school systems. Carefully avoiding sensationalism, this balanced and well researched series provides a superb barometer of community thinking about the problems of education in the District at the moment of desegregation. <sup>47/</sup>

To the schools' credit, the writer cited the fact that "children still learn the three R's in the elementary schools," that the high schools "still turn out young people well prepared for college," that the "schools serve record numbers of students who stay in school longer than ever before," and that the Army had found "increased mental aptitude for learning among soldiers during World War II as compared with World War I." On the debit side, the Star listed the following:

- 1) There are elementary school and high school graduates who cannot read, write or figure acceptably.
  2. There are high school graduates who, in "the good old days," would have been flunked out of any respectable high school.
  - 3) The curriculum has been "watered down" for some.
  - 4) The schools are turning out many pupils inadequately prepared in mathematics for pursuing studies of the exact sciences in colleges.
- ... <sup>48/</sup>

Significantly, the series which looked at the schools of suburban Maryland and Virginia as well as those of the District, did not suggest that the District's problems were unique or particularly severe. <sup>49/</sup> Student achievement, the reporter suggested, was a national concern.

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47/ Star, June 6, 1954.

48/ Ibid.

49 Star, June 6-13, 1954.

The decision of the U.S. Supreme Court striking down segregation temporarily deflected public attention in the District from the emerging concern with student achievement to the logistical problems of ending the dual school system. Concern with student achievement would soon reemerge with a vengeance, however. When it did, the District's schools would be overwhelmingly black, and the problems of student achievement here would no longer be viewed by most people as part of a general national problem, but rather as a peculiarly local one. In reality, the crisis of confidence would appear so early and with such severity in Washington because the capital experienced the profound social changes of post-war America earlier than other cities and in their starkest form. Truly, the capital became a surrogate for the social problems of the nation.

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## The Crisis Defined

1954 — 1967

In the thirteen years between the end of Washington's dual school system and the issuance of the Wright decree and the Passow Report, the current image of Washington's public schools became firmly fixed in public consciousness — a system "in crisis," a system that parents with choice would not use, a system entirely incapable of adequately educating the bulk of its students. No longer simply a system with "problems" or "weaknesses," (after all, everyone has problems and every institution has weaknesses), it became a system hopelessly flawed and in need of radical transformation.

Why did this "crisis of confidence" occur? The answer lies in four closely related developments: the worsening of actual conditions in the schools, at a time when the schools were still being required to absorb a rapidly increasing number of students from weak educational backgrounds; widespread racial prejudice, both of the segregationist variety that assumed innate black inferiority and of the liberal variety, that asserted as a point of fact that black children could only learn effectively when educated in schools with whites; rapidly accelerating public and parental expectations of schools, throughout the country and in particular among black people whose aspirations were aroused by the civil rights movement; and increased public and media attention to the schools and the academic achievement of their students as desegregation and its aftermath made education front page news.

The objective problems were real enough. In 1949, total enrollment in the D.C. public schools went slightly above what it had been in 1937. Thereafter, enrollment

grew substantially every year. In less than two decades, school enrollment climbed from approximately 94,000 (1949) to almost 150,000 (1967.) All of the increase occurred in black enrollment. The year before desegregation there were almost 47,000 white students in the system. The number declined precipitously by ten percent in the fall of 1954, and by smaller percentages each successive year, so that, with the black enrollment rising rapidly, white students constituted only about seven percent of the total enrollment by 1967.

Five years before desegregation, the Strayer Report had clearly documented the inadequacy of facilities, staff and budget for the number of children in the system at that time. Recruiting enough qualified teachers and building enough facilities would have been a difficult task even if sufficient funds had been forthcoming, but Congress and the Commissioners grossly shortchanged public education throughout the 1950's. Moreover, the increased enrollment consisted disproportionately of low income children. In these years the school system truly had to bear the brunt of social transformations far beyond the schools' control.

These problems would have been difficult enough to solve had the community remained united. Profound and rapid social change almost always results in political dissension and conflict, however. So, too, in Washington. Segregationists, who wanted only to prove that integration could not work, attacked the schools. So did black activists and liberals angered over years of inequality and by the continuing inability of the schools to raise student achievement. And so did home rule activists, because the local population had no say in the selection of the members of the Board of Education or in the appropriations for education.

Finally, local issues in the nation's capital had a way of assuming national importance when they mirrored national concerns. In the post-Brown, post-Sputnik, baby boom era, both race and education assumed national importance. The schools of the nation's capital were directly under federal control and directly under the watchful eye of the Washington press corps which avidly reported educational problems in Washington because these problems were national problems appearing in exaggerated form in the capital city. All of the actors, then -- politicians, policy analysts, activists, reformers, and journalists -- had their own reasons to advertise widely the shortcomings of the District's public schools.

The first round was fought between segregationists and integrationists. Although many border states desegregated their schools in the fall of 1954, none received so much national attention from both sides as Washington. Numerous pamphlets and articles by proponents of integration eagerly proclaimed to the nation the success of the capital's unified school system. Carl Hansen, the leading proponent of desegregation within the top school leadership who soon would become superintendent, wrote a widely publicized pamphlet describing Washington's Miracle of Social Adjustment. Articles in various national periodicals struck a similar theme: "Washington: A Model for the Rest of the Nation," "Washington: Showcase of Integration," and "Progress Along the Potomac." <sup>50/</sup>

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50/ Carl F. Hansen, Miracle of Social Adjustment (New York Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1957); David C. Williams, "Progress Along the Potomac," The Progressive 22 (June 1958), pp. 16-18; Erwin Knoll, "Washington: Showcase of Integration," Commentary 27 (March 1959) pp. 194-202; Douglas Carter, "Washington: A Model for the Rest of the Nation," The Reporter, 11 (December 30, 1954), pp. 12-15;

On the other side, James Davis, a Georgia Congressman and a member of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, declared in March 1956 that desegregation in Washington was "not only a scholastic failure, but — as an experiment in human relations — a nightmare." As chairman of a special subcommittee to investigate the desegregation of Washington's schools, he presided over a notorious set of hearings designed to discredit integrated education. The final report of his subcommittee, widely circulated by White Citizens' Councils in the South, stated that there was "a wide disparity in mental ability between white and Negro students" which created "a most difficult teaching situation in the integrated schools," and that "discipline problems and delinquency resulting from the integration of the schools have been appalling." Concluding that "the integrated school system of the District of Columbia is not a model to be copied by other communities in the United States," the report called for the reestablishment of a dual system. <sup>51/</sup>

Some journalists and political figures quickly pointed to the "new" educational problems created by desegregation without necessarily attacking desegregation per se. U.S. News and World Report, which had virtually ignored the D.C. public schools before 1954, undertook something of a crusade to inform its readers of the educational and discipline problems created by the ending of the dual school system. A February 1956 article headlined "DO MIXED SCHOOLS LOWER CLASSROOM STANDARDS?" began with the following in bold type:

A close look at what has happened to schools in the nation's capital, after nearly two years of mixed classrooms shows this:

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51/ U.S. House Committee on the District of Columbia, Investigation of Public School Conditions (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1957), pp. 44-46. See also U.S. House Committee on the District of Columbia, Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Public Standards and Conditions and Juvenile Delinquency in the District of Columbia (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1956), and Carl F. Hansen, Danger in Washington (West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Company, 1968), pp. 41-45.

Since Negro and white children were integrated, pupils' test averages have run below the national average.

Costly new measures are being taken now to maintain standards and give help to lagging pupils. <sup>52/</sup>

Brigadier General Thomas A. Lane, the Army Engineer on the Board of Commissioners which governed the District, proposed that the school system handle the disparity between black and white achievement levels by returning all children to the grade at which they tested academically, regardless of their age. Lane nonetheless steadfastly opposed increased school appropriations, arguing that the schools should be able to get along with fewer teachers and larger classes. <sup>53/</sup>

The segregationists and the skeptics, then, seized upon test score data to argue either that integration would not work or that at least it had created unprecedented educational problems. When the school system released the first city-wide test scores after desegregation, journalists and politicians viewed the tests as a revelation. In fact, there had been testing going on in both systems for thirty years, and the various reports of the research departments, summarized in the Strayer Report, had for years shown the academic deficiencies. The separate research departments before 1954, however, had each developed their own testing program using different tests. Now, a single testing program made comparisons between black and white schools easier at the very moment when a lot of people were looking for ways to discredit integrated schools.

Understandably, the proponents of desegregation felt compelled to answer charges that educational standards had declined after desegregation, even as they pointed to the gross inadequacies of facilities and budget. In Miracle of Social Adjustment, Carl

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52/ "Do Mixed Schools Lower Classroom Standards?" U.S. News and World Report 40 (February 3, 1956), pp. 38-40.

53/ Star, March 11, 1956.

Hansen acknowledged that many people feared a decline of academic standards as a result of desegregation:

When the results of the first city-wide achievement tests began to reach the newspapers in 1955, the fear seemed to be justified, for these tests showed that achievement medians were considerably below national standards.

When this information, without adequate evaluation, hit the press, a widespread reaction was, "This is the result of integration ...." <sup>54/</sup>

In response to these fears, Hansen argued that the deficiencies of large number of Negro children resulted both from the cultural disadvantages of those who were poor and the inequality of black schools before desegregation. Desegregation would make possible a good academic program and with adequate resources this program could gradually overcome the deficiencies. Therefore, the desegregated school system should be judged by the extent to which it can produce improvement in student test scores, but not by whether test scores have equalled national norms.

Defenders of desegregation embraced this analysis, and when, in the late 1950s, test scores did rise somewhat, they eagerly pointed to this as proof that integration worked. Howard University professor Ellis O. Knox wrote a widely read report in 1957 for a group formed to respond to the attacks of the Davis Subcommittee. He showed that "some of the pupils in elementary schools which were predominantly colored achieved superior scores on the Stanford Achievement Tests," and he predicted that although "many colored pupils have lived in an unfavorable environment" that over a period of years with proper training and more favorable opportunities their scores would rise. <sup>55/</sup>

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54/ Hansen, Miracle of Social Adjustment, p. 67.

55/ Ellis O. Knox, Democracy and the District of Columbia Public Schools: A Brief Report (Washington: NAACP, 1957), pp. 14-19.

In June of 1958, Hansen, recently named superintendent, held a press conference to announce improvements in test scores in the elementary schools and the junior highs, and predicted that "elementary children will reach national averages within three years." And the following October, when the Governor of Virginia referred to the District schools as an "intolerable mess," the Post, the only daily to support desegregation before 1954 asserted that "desegregation did not ... lower school standards."

What it really did was expose how low the standards had been in the previously separate Negro schools. The remarkable thing is that, four years after desegregation, school standards and performance have improved materially. Each year the city-wide achievement tests in major subjects have disclosed heartening gains ... There is every indication that within two to three years the highly successful four track system will succeed in bringing the averages abreast of the national norms. 56/

At the same time, a Post series answering the Davis Committee, later reprinted in a pamphlet entitled The Truth About Desegregation in Washington's Schools, stated that "the schools can point to steady progress toward the two major goals they set" when the single system began — "raising achievement of those below grade, and keeping capable students from being held back by slower schoolmates."

The defense of integrated schools continued. Erwin Knoll, a Post education reporter, wrote in an article for Commentary in 1959 that "In the fifth year of integration, there is convincing evidence that ... achievement levels throughout the city have been raised to within a few months of national standards, and progress continues. 57/

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56/ Post, June 27, October 23, 1958.

57/ Knoll, "Washington: Showcase," p. 199.

By 1960, Carl Hansen could report in two leading education journals that as a result of desegregation, "significant gains are being chalked up," the most important of which were "measurable gains" in standardized test scores. The median test scores in the sixth grade, he announced, were "at or above the national norm." <sup>58/</sup>

By the early 1960s, public education had become an issue of ongoing importance in local affairs. The press gave extended coverage to the acrimonious debate over effects of desegregation on educational standards, stimulated in particular by the Davis Subcommittee and its critics, and more generally by the symbolic national importance of the nation's capital. However, even as rising test scores gave optimists something to point to in defense of Washington's schools, the closely related problems of rapidly rising enrollments, white departure from the school system and the city, and the inadequate physical plant and school budget helped to reinforce the image — and the reality — of a troubled school system. A four part editorial series entitled "A School Program for Washington" appeared in November of 1955 in the Post. The first editorial, "Crisis in the Schools," defined the crisis entirely in terms of shortages — of facilities, of teachers and of money. <sup>59/</sup> The Star in its own twelve part news analysis three months later under the series heading "Crisis in the Schools," likewise detailed these shortages and also examined concerns about student achievement. In the final paragraph of the last article, the Star's writer summed up the core problem as he saw it: "The feeling beneath the surface in the Washington school system is fear that the job can't be done without more resources and that they won't be provided. It is not very comforting." <sup>60/</sup>

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58/ Carl F. Hansen, "Desegregation in the District of Columbia: A Developmental Process," School and Society, 88 (May 7, 1960), p. 240, and "The Scholastic Performance of Negro and White Pupils in the Integrated Public Schools of the District of Columbia," Harvard Educational Review, 30, 3 (Summer 1960), pp. 216-236.

59/ Post, November 23, 1955.

60/ Star, March 16, 1956.

By the early 1960s the proponents of integration had helped to create a revolution of rising expectations. Even though the basic problems of facilities, staff and budget had not been alleviated, even though enrollments of low income children continued to climb, advocates of integration pointed to improved test scores. In so doing, they strengthened the public conviction that the schools should be judged by the achievements of students, not by what was put into them. The daily press, which had virtually ignored test scores before 1954, now reported and analyzed them dutifully every year. When, in the mid-1960s test scores began to decline again, defenders of the system were discredited by the very yardstick they had embraced a few years earlier. Then the image of the D.C. schools as a system making progress despite severe problems was replaced by the image of a school system facing disaster.

The conviction that discipline problems loomed large also contributed to the declining reputation of the schools in the 1960s. The discipline issue, like the issue of achievement, received broad public attention as a result of the sensationalistic and distorted revelations of the Davis Subcommittee. Integrationists answered these claims, admitting that desegregation had produced some racial conflict in the schools and some problems of student behavior, but insisting that things were not so bad.

Then, on Thanksgiving day in 1962, a riot broke out at the D.C. Stadium where the public school city-wide football champions (Eastern High School) played the Catholic school city-wide champions (St. John's.) Most of the St. John's players were white; all of the Eastern players were black. During the first half, there were a number of incidents in which black youths, angered by the lead of St. John's, attacked white spectators. In the second half, after the Eastern football coach (who was white) furiously protested a call, pandemonium broke loose. This "race riot" drew national attention. Superintendent Hansen appointed a bi-racial citizen's committee to

investigate the cause and to suggest cures. The committee's report condemned the public schools' lack of discipline and their "permissiveness." "Fear rages through many school buildings," the report asserted, and there are "acts of violence, assaults, disrespect of teachers." The Thanksgiving Day event, the report concluded, was "but a serious symptom of a larger problem that exists in the nation's capital." <sup>61/</sup> Lack of discipline now had become firmly wedded to the public's perceptions of the schools.

Besides declining overall test scores in the middle of the decade and growing recognition of discipline problems, other factors contributed to this decline in reputation. As the problems of civil rights, poverty and the big cities began to assume center stage in national politics, advocates of the New Frontier and the Great Society frequently pointed to the deficiencies of the Washington public schools in order to arouse national interest in civil rights and education. In 1963, for example, Senator Hubert Humphrey told an audience in Washington that "every American in this room ought to be ashamed of what's happening here," and that "if the capital can't set an example in education, how can we expect some Toonerville out there to do it?" <sup>62/</sup> And in 1965 and 1966, the House Education and Labor Committee's Task Force on Antipoverty in the District held well publicized hearings on the D.C. schools. Its final report depicted "some deplorable conditions" and raised "an array of compelling questions requiring immediate action." <sup>63/</sup>

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61/ Alvin Shuster and Ben A. Franklin, "How a Race Riot Happened," Saturday Evening Post 263 (May 4, 1963), pp. 15-19.

62/ Post, October 5, 1963.

63/ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Education and Labor, A Task Force Study of the Public School System in the District of Columbia As It Relates to the War on Poverty (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), p. III. See also, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Education and Labor, Hearings Before Task Force on Antipoverty in the District of Columbia on Investigation of the Public School System in the District of Columbia and Its Relation to Poverty (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966).

Local black and civil rights groups in the 1960s became increasingly impatient with the District's public schools. Julius Hobson, by far the school's most articulate and active critic, pointed to their failure to educate poor children successfully and in particular objected to the tracking system which, he argued, favored white and middle class children and consigned the poor to a grossly inadequate education. He objected also to the policy of maintaining exclusively neighborhood schools because, he said, it resulted in lower student-teacher ratios and higher per pupil costs in the underenrolled largely white schools west of Rock Creek Park.

Moreover, civil rights activists viewed the Board of Education and the school superintendent as unresponsive to them and to the black community. The judges who appointed the Board had for decades maintained a membership of six whites and three blacks. In 1962 they changed it to four blacks and five whites. By the 1960's, with the student body about 90% black and the teaching staff about three quarters black, the presence of a white majority on the Board angered black leaders. Moreover, the vast majority of Superintendent Hansen's top appointees were white. Of course the local community had no control over the school board membership, since the President of the United States named the judges who named the School Board members. Thus, as protest and discontent with the system mounted, the Board of Education meetings became increasingly acrimonious, and the Board itself soon became a public issue. As late as 1962, the Post could state in an editorial that "Washington is fortunate in a School board which has fulfilled [its] role conscientiously, [and] a Superintendent who has proved himself a most able and vigorous administrator." <sup>64/</sup> By 1965, a columnist for the Post, in an article headlined "School Board Ignores the Public," had this to say:

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64/ Post, July 25, 1962.

You certainly can't accuse the D.C. School Board of being overly concerned about its "public image." It continues on its meandering course marked by long-winded meetings and petty squabbles between members, oblivious to the kind of picture it presents to the public. <sup>65/</sup>

Public attacks on the school board would increase, reinforcing the image of a school system in trouble.

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s non-public schools were virtually ignored by the media. An occasional article might appear regarding annual enrollments in non-public schools and in particular about the effects of rapidly growing enrollment on the Catholic Archdiocese Schools. In the early 1960s, a few articles announced that most of the elite private schools had finally begun to admit a few black children.

As the reputation of the public schools began to decline, however, the press showed a new interest in private school enrollments which had heretofore been reported in short articles without analysis. In 1966, the first of many articles on the "trend" to private schools among blacks received prominent play in the Post:

Negroes who can afford to enroll their children in private schools are turning away from Washington's public school system in increasing numbers.... Dissatisfaction with the public schools and desegregation of some formerly all-white private schools are cited by local educators as reasons for the increase.

The next year, another Post article, headlined "Middle Class Quit City Schools," cited the movement of middle class people to the suburbs and the growing enrollment in non-

<sup>65/</sup> Ibid., July 5, 1965.

public schools as part of a long run trend making the District's schools predominantly low income. 66/

In reality, the movement to the suburbs had begun long before school desegregation and was not primarily the result of dissatisfaction with the schools. The number of Washington children attending non-public schools remained small in comparison to total school enrollment, and as a percentage of all D.C. school children declined every year until 1969 and has increased only very gradually since then. In 1953, 15.3% of all children living in the District who attended school were enrolled in non-public schools. By 1969 the figure had declined to 9%. In actual numbers, there were 1,500 fewer District children attending non-public schools in 1969 than in 1953. But critics of the school system, and the press, quickly picked up the non-public school theme because it seemed to highlight the problems of the public schools. School board member John A. Sessions, an ally of Julius Hobson, when asked in 1966 to comment on a story about the growing black enrollment in private schools, responded that "The schools have deteriorated so badly that, regardless of race, people who can afford the cost are taking their kids out of public schools." 67/.

The year 1967 saw an extraordinary constellation of events wipe away whatever remained of public confidence in the D.C. schools. In April, the Board of Education released a new set of test scores that showed students in the public schools far below national norms in achievement. These scores sparked a sweeping editorial condemnation of the schools in the Post:

66/ Ibid, September 13, 1966 and February 21, 1967.

67/ Ibid, September 13, 1966.

The collapse of public education in Washington is now evident. Reading scores reported in this newspaper show that fully one-third of the city school's pupils have fallen two years or more behind their proper grade level....

The real question is whether the city is going to have public schools, in any legitimate and useful sense, in the future ... [T]he city schools are increasingly being left with the children who come from poor, uneducated families. And these are precisely the children whom the city schools teach least efficiently. Citizens Congress and President Johnson now have an urgent obligation to face the truth that nothing at all will help, short of a massive reorganization of the Washington school system. <sup>68/</sup>

A few months later, Judge J. Skelly Wright, in his decision in the case of Hobson v. Hansen, ordered an end to the tracking system, and the busing of children from overcrowded black schools to under-capacity schools west of Rock Creek Park. When the Board of Education voted not to appeal the decree, Hansen resigned as superintendent. <sup>69/</sup>

The Wright decision reflected all of the changes in public expectations of the schools that had evolved since 1945. In his "principal findings" Judge Wright cited the failure of the schools to educate poor black children adequately as evidence in and of itself of discrimination:

The scholastic achievement of the disadvantaged child, Negro and white, is strongly related to the racial and socio-economic composition of the student body of his school. A racially and socially integrated school environment increases the scholastic achievement of the disadvantaged child of whatever race....

<sup>68/</sup> Ibid., April 18, 1967.

<sup>69/</sup> Julius Hobson, Jr. "Educational Policy and the Courts: The Case of Washington, D.C.," The Urban Review, 10, 1 (1978), pp. 5-79. See also, Hansen, Danger in Washington, Chapter 6.

As they proceed through the Washington school system, the reading scores primarily of the Negro and poor children, but not the white and middle class, fall increasingly behind the national norm. By senior high school the discrepancy reaches several grades. 70/

Judge Wright's decree made the publication a few months later of Professor A. Harry Passow's massive fifteen month study of the District schools something of an anticlimax. Unlike its predecessors, the Passow Report made student achievement the central issue, and unlike the Strayer report, its findings were not complimentary. "Education in the District is in deep and probably worsening trouble," Passow stated.

Applying the usual criteria of scholastic achievement as measured by standardized tests, by holding power of the school, by college-going and further education, by post-secondary school employment status, by performance on Armed Forces induction tests, the District schools do not measure up well.

The first item in Passow's summary of "major findings" about the District schools read: "A low level of scholastic achievement as measured by performance on standardized tests." 71/

Student achievement had become the be all and end all of public education, and by 1967 there was broad consensus that Washington schools failed miserably by this standard. Yet at the very moment when Washington was absorbing the full implications of the Passow study and the Wright decree, federally sponsored research asserted as fact what actually was a "liberal" racial prejudice — that black children could not learn as well in all-black classrooms as in integrated ones. The results of a study mandated by the 1965 Civil Rights Act appeared in preliminary form in 1966 and in full form the following year. The report, Equality of Educational Opportunity, written by James Coleman and a team of social scientists, concluded that "in the long run integration

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70/ Hobson v. Hansen, p. 406.

71/ Passow Report, p. 2.

should be expected to have a positive effect on Negro achievement" and that an "analysis of test performance of Negro children in integrated schools indicates positive effects of integration." <sup>72/</sup> Also in 1967, a major study by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission on remedies for Racial Isolation in the Schools reached similar conclusions. "Racial isolation in the schools tends to lower [black] students' achievement, restrict their aspirations, and impair their sense of being able to affect their own destiny," it asserted. "By contrast, Negro children in predominately white schools more often score higher on achievement tests, develop higher aspirations, and have a firmer sense of control over their own destinies." <sup>73/</sup> Judge Wright cited these studies, and was strongly influenced by them, even though the District, with a white enrollment then of only about seven percent, had no realistic possibility of significant school integration.

Although the press did not discuss the implications of these findings for the Washington schools, it was difficult to disregard their message. A predominantly low income school system, ninety three percent of whose children were black, was being told that black children did not learn very well unless they were mixed with white children, and that low income children did not learn very well unless they were mixed with middle income children. The uncritical acceptance by liberals of this view that racial mixing was necessary for black academic achievement helped to reinforce the growing conviction that there was little hope for Washington's schools.

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72/ James S. Coleman, et. al, Equality of Educational Opportunity (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 28.

73/ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Racial Isolation in the Public Schools (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1967), Vol. I, p. 114.

## The Years of Turmoil:

1967 - 1975

It is difficult to summarize succinctly the rapid pace of events in the eight years after Carl Hansen's resignation. Here are the highlights. The appointed Board of Education, more divided than ever, moved to fill the superintendency even though legislation finally passed Congress providing for the election of the Board. The new superintendent, William R. Manning, tried to implement the Wright decree and the recommendations of the Passow Report while the first elections were underway for the new Board of Education. Not surprisingly, the new elected Board, which took office in January of 1969, after several months decided to seek a new superintendent. While searching for Manning's replacement, the Board also adopted a plan for a reading mobilization year proposed by the eminent psychologist Dr. Kenneth Clark. <sup>74/</sup> The plan evoked protests from the teachers' union, which had objected to Clark's proposal to pay salary differentials to more successful teachers. A newly appointed superintendent, Hugh Scott, the first black person to hold the position on a permanent basis (Benjamin Henley had held it twice on an acting basis) soon found himself embroiled in a major conflict with Clark over the implementation of a plan he had nothing to do with designing.

Just before Scott took up his duties, Julius Hobson, elected to the Board in the first election and defeated in 1970, returned to court to seek equalization of the schools' expenditures by requiring a comparable mix of lower and higher paid teachers in each school building. In the second Hobson v. Hansen decision, Judge Wright on May 25, 1971 ordered equal spending per pupil, requiring massive teacher transfers to balance total

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74/ On the Clark Plan, see Kenneth B. Clark, A Possible Reality: A Design for the Attainment of High Academic Achievement for Inner-City Students (New York Emerson Hall, 1972), Ralph C. Jenkins, "A Case Study: Implementation of a Plan for Educational Reform in the Washington, D.C. Public School System - The Clark Plan," (EdD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1973), and Larry Cuban, "The Politics of a Fantasy: The Clark Report and Its Response," D.C. Gazette, December 7, 1970, pp. 2 & 12.

salaries spent in each school. In the fall of 1972, the first major teachers strike kept schools closed for several weeks. In the meantime, the Board, which had undergone substantial change in composition and leadership, became increasingly discontented with Hugh Scott, and he declined to seek reappointment.

The Board undertook still another national superintendent search and appointed Barbara A. Sizemore in 1973. Sizemore soon found herself in a bitter struggle with a divided Board of Education, a majority of which disagreed with her policies and determined to remove her from office. Sizemore fought back, and after a prolonged and acrimonious "trial" in which the board presented its case in open meetings, it fired her. <sup>75/</sup> This constant change in leadership and educational program only made conditions in the school system worse.

It was also bad for the schools' already badly tattered image, and reinforced the view that the Board of Education itself had become part of the problem. The media devoted an extraordinary amount of attention to the Board. Witness the following sample:

- July 6, 1968. Post columnist Ellen Hoffman wrote article headlined "Board Flunking Its Public Relations."
- July 21, 1968. WMAL radio and television broadcast a stinging editorial rebuke of the Board. "Further evidence of the D.C. School Board's inability to lead was not necessary. Nevertheless the School Board outdid itself last week with a shouting match ...."
- January 29, 1969. Washington Post editorial. "There was more of donnybrook than of deliberation in the first meeting of the District's first Elected School Board. The Board, to be blunt about it, looked ludicrous — like children nattering about the division of a birthday cake."

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75/ On-Sizemore's administration, see her own account, The Ruptured Diamond: The Politics of Decentralization of the District of Columbia Public Schools (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), and Hugh J. Scott, The Black School Superintendent: Messiah or Scapegoat? (Washington: Howard University Press, 1980), p. 87-102.

- February 15 1969. Post columnist Herbert H. Denton wrote article headlined "Bickering Marks New School Board in Action." "A Board popularly elected or a Board appointed by the District judges? At this juncture, its beginning to look like a different inning of the same old ballgame."
- May 24, 1969. Star editorial stated that "the board itself is in such deep trouble that the question now is whether it has the ability to function at all."
- August 1, 1969. Post editorial concluded that "Washington needs a new Board of Education as well as a new superintendent."
- September 24, 1969. Dr. A. Harry Passow, speaking at a community forum on education, criticized the School Board for lack of leadership, and specifically for failure to implement his recommendations in the Passow Report.
- January 28, 1970. Washington Daily News editorial on the swearing in of new Board members stated, "The best to be said for the new [Board] ... is that it could not possibly be any worse than its predecessor."
- February 8, 1970. D.C. Republican Committeeman Carl Shipley, appearing on a public affairs program on WRC-TV, called the elected school board "irresponsible," and "a bunch of bums," and the school system "a garbage mill," "a disgrace," and "the worst system in the U.S. and the world."
- July 11, 1970. Star editorial complained that "much of what the school board ought to be doing is overshadowed by the bitterness of its internal dissension ...."
- August 24, 1970. Editorial was broadcast on WMAL radio and TV condemning the Board as "openly riddled with dissension ...." <sup>76/</sup>

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76/ Clippings File, Washingtonian Collection, folders entitled "Board of Education."

When Marion Barry ran for the Board along with a slate of candidates endorsed by him in 1971, he blamed the conduct of the Board on his opponent, school board President Anita Allen. Barry and his slate won, and Barry was quickly elected Board President, resulting in a flurry of stories in the press about the new, peaceful and productive school board. The appointment of Barbara Sizemore a year later was followed by a honeymoon period in which the press pointed with cautious optimism to the new hope in the system. When Sizemore's relations with the Board turned sour, however, the press returned to a familiar theme. The Post attitude, like that of other papers, was a plague on all your houses.

It is idle to argue about which side in the Sizemore dispute has been more inept, more self-indulgent or more neglectful of the real business at hand ... both sides have become so engrossed in their reckless and demeaning conflict that they have forfeited any claim to leadership in the city's public schools.

Post columnist William Raspberry suggested that "serious thought be given to the question of whether we really need a school board." 77/

The Sizemore dispute, coming as it did after years of negative publicity about the Board, undoubtedly contributed to the poor reputation of the schools. In the 1975 Bureau of Social Science Research survey of opinion about the schools, residents were asked to rate the superintendent, the mayor the school board and the teachers on how good a job they were doing in meeting the educational needs of the children. All four received

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77/ Post, May 3, August 13, 1975.

more negative than positive ratings, but teachers were ranked best, the superintendent (Sizemore) second, the mayor (Walter Washington) third, and the Board of Education a distant fourth. <sup>78/</sup>

Congress could always be counted upon to publicize further the schools' problems, and in 1970 Congressman John Dowdy chaired a House District Subcommittee which investigated the schools. The final report stated that the investigation began in response to "the constant stream of press releases, official memoranda and expensive study reports" pointing to the schools' failure. It concluded that the District school system was "floundering in its own incompetence," and the victim of "too many layers of administrative fat." <sup>79/</sup>

The Board fared so poorly in public opinion not only because of the manner in which it conducted its business and because of embarrassing charges of administrative incompetence, but more fundamentally because the educational problems facing the schools seemed so severe. The public's expectations of major change had been raised and dashed repeatedly since desegregation. Board members felt keenly the need to do something, anything, differently. The string of new initiatives, new superintendents and new beginnings grew longer, each ending in apparent failure, and each adding to administrative instability. Not very far below the surface lurked the basic and long-standing criticisms of the schools: inadequate funding and facilities, poor pupil achievement as measured by test scores, and discipline problems.

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78/ Gallin and Dixon, School Patterns and Attitudes, pp. 118-120.

79/ U.S. Congress, House Committee on the District of Columbia, Investigation and Study of the Public School System of the District of Columbia (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1970.)

The budget and facilities problems came to seem less important after 1967, partly because education appropriations had increased substantially by the end of the 1960s, partly because the District became eligible for substantial federal grants, and partly because the enrollments peaked and started to decline. Discipline problems, however, seemed to worsen. Stories of vandalism and school violence appeared regularly in the press throughout these years. The discipline problem became the focus of attention in the winter of the 1969-1970 school year. In December, Acting Superintendent Benjamin Henley submitted a report to the Board stating that children could not attend school in safety, and that vandalism and theft were crippling the school plant. A few weeks later, three incidents involving guns in the schools occurred on the same day, one resulting in the fatal shooting of a junior high school student. The following month, in a letter to school principals and PTA presidents, Council member Joseph Yeldell and DCPTA president Gloria Roberts expressed alarm over "the rapidly deteriorating educational environment in our schools." 80/

Test scores, however, remained the most enduring issue, and throughout this period of leadership turnover, the press continued to publish test score results and to cite them as evidence of the schools' inadequacy. Although in a particular year there might be modest improvements in the lower grades, overall test scores remained low and substantially behind national norms throughout this period, and the daily press gave each new set of test results considerable attention, reinforcing the schools' image of failure.

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80/ Gloria Roberts and Joseph Yeldell letter, February 18, 1970, Papers of the D.C. Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1969/1970 volume; Post, December 9, 1969, January 7, 1970; Star, December 7, 1969.

Almost everyone involved with education in the city accepted the legitimacy of these test results as the measure of educational success until Barbara Sizemore became superintendent. Sizemore argued publicly that the tests were biased against poor and minority children. She advocated their replacement with "criterion-referenced tests" in which the schools determined first what they wanted children to learn and then devised instruments to test how well they had learned it, without reference to national norms. Sizemore's position on the traditional "norm-referenced" tests became a major point of contention between her and the Board of Education, and received wide publicity in the press.

William Raspberry in particular used his Post column to argue with Sizemore. In a letter to Raspberry, quoted in his column, Sizemore explained her position:

The constant problem in American education is how do we educate children who differ from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant norm and who are poor. . . . Norm-referenced tests do nothing to help us discover the reasons or to design a solution. In fact, we waste our money by giving them, and the only reason we do give them is so that we can have some way to sort winners from losers without admitting that we discriminate against certain people with regard to opportunity.

... Rather than continue administering norm-referenced tests we should be investing our monies in research which yields higher level scientific knowledge.

Raspberry's response summed up the widespread criticism of Sizemore's position. Maybe she is right, Raspberry argued, but testing "doesn't end in the school hours."

Tests are the keepers of the gate to decent colleges, the preferred professions, the better jobs, and the other things that Americans, rich

and poor, consider aspects of the good life. Maybe tests shouldn't hold such sway. But so long as they do, we'd better teach our kids to pass them. 81/

A few days later, David Burgess, a columnist for the Afro-American echoed this view. "I believe those who are in authority would be rendering a distinct disservice to black students," he wrote, "if the Standardized Test was made lower or eliminated ... unless they believe that black pupils are inherently inferior." 82/

The controversy over testing during the Sizemore administration represented the only serious challenge to standardized achievement testing since the schools first started giving them in the 1920s. The outcome showed how thoroughly the Board and the public had embraced student achievement as the ultimate measure of school effectiveness, and norm-referenced tests as the ultimate measure of student achievement.

The negative image of the schools, founded upon low test scores and discipline problems, and reinforced by the poor public performance of the Board of Education and the administrative deficiencies of the system, continued to be underlined in numerous newspaper articles about private schools. These articles portrayed middle class black and white parents paying for expensive private schools and going to extraordinary lengths to prepare their four-year-olds to "pass" the admission "test" for Sidwell Friends or Beauvoir. "Private schools — once considered the province either of the well-heeled

81/ Post, September 2, 1974.

82/ Washington Afro-American, September 7, 1974.

who were inclined to be snobbish or of those whose children needed special tutoring," wrote Myra MacPherson in the Post, in 1969, "are more and more thought of by the middle class parents as a necessary alternative to public-school-education." A Star writer echoed the theme in 1975. "There is growing evidence that private school is becoming as accepted as orthodontia and toe shoes at economic levels where, a generation ago, if a child was sent to private school it meant he had problems", she wrote. <sup>83/</sup> Had the various reporters of this new "trend" bothered to look at the actual figures, they would have discovered that in 1975 less than ten percent of all District children attending school went to a non-public school, as compared with over sixteen percent in 1945. In 1949, the District recorded the largest number of its students in non-public schools, just under 18,000. By 1974 there were only 14,000. Nonetheless, like virtually everyone else reporters found themselves inundated with negative information about the public schools. Small wonder that reporters ignored a pattern of gradually declining non-public school enrollment and reported a "trend" toward private schools on the basis of a few interviews with parents, headmasters and private school admissions officers.

School officials did not remain oblivious to the schools' image problems and in various ways attempted to bring the positive achievements of the schools to the attention of the public. Each school superintendent developed his or her program of public information. Barbara Sizemore in particular developed an extensive office of publications and information. Superintendents frequently appeared on radio and television, and for a number of years The Washington Afro-American published a weekly feature entitled "Focus on Schools." School officials had for decades used the press and later the broadcast media to enhance public support for the schools. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however these methods were hopelessly inadequate to the task of reversing the schools' negative image.

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83/ Post, May 11, 1969; Star, March 13, 1975.

In the early 1970's, parents and school board members undertook campaigns specifically designed to win back children from the private schools. School Board President Marion Barry in 1972 announced a movement to convince middle class white and black parents to use the public schools. About the same time, parents in ward three printed brochures describing the advantages of the public schools in that part of the city, met with real estate agents urging them to distribute the brochures and to speak favorably of the schools, talked with nursery school parents about the public schools, and tried to get agencies like the State Department and the World Bank to speak positively about the city's public schools to new employees looking for housing in the Washington area. <sup>84/</sup> Efforts of this kind, however, had to compete against the continuous stream of negative publicity fostered by the turmoil in school leadership, and the obdurate problem of raising student achievement.

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84/ Post, February 21, April 12, 1972; Star, March 22, 1971.

## The Emergence of Stability,

1975 — 1982

Negative reputations are more easily created than dispelled. The years since 1975, when Vincent Reed became superintendent of schools, have witnessed significant improvements in the school system, but no commensurate change in the schools' reputation. What are these changes, and why have they failed to bring with them significant improvements in reputation?

Since late 1975, the schools have had stable administrative leadership. Vincent Reed, appointed acting superintendent in late 1975 and permanent superintendent early the next year, held his position until the end of 1980, the longest tenure for a superintendent since Carl Hansen. Moreover, unlike Hansen, whose reputation deteriorated over time and who became the object of harsh criticism for his academic program, Reed left the superintendency at the height of his popularity. Under this leadership, the system developed and implemented the first comprehensive curriculum since Hansen's tracking system.

The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) avoided the pitfalls of previous efforts to improve academic performance in a predominantly low income school system. It did not divide students into ability groups as had Hansen's curricula. It did not promise a quick dramatic transformation as did Clark's plan for a Reading Mobilization Year. It did not seek to avoid the difficulties of measuring students through norm-referenced testing as Sizemore had sought to do and indeed adopted as its yardstick national norms instead of the somewhat lower "big city norms" used under Scott. On the other hand, it built its highly structured curriculum in the way that Barbara Sizemore had proposed — by deciding what it is students need to learn, and by devising criterion-referenced tests

to determine whether they had learned it. A pupil progress plan that accompanied the curriculum determined whether students had mastered the skills of each semester, and only students who had mastered these skills were to be promoted to the next grade. <sup>85/</sup>

Although Reed retired abruptly in December of 1980, complaining of difficulties in working with the Board of Education, the CBC went on under the interim superintendent and under Reed's successor, Floretta D. McKenzie. No longer did a change in leadership mean a change in educational program. Moreover, under Reed's superintendency the scores on standardized tests began to rise, modestly but steadily, and the Board of Education, in an effort to raise graduation standards substantially increased the number of courses required for high school graduation. Furthermore, the extreme administrative disorder that characterized the earlier years subsided.

Underlying these changes was another over which no one had much control. The birthrate began to drop, the District lost population, and therefore enrolment in the city's schools started to decline. Indeed, enrollments had been declining steadily since 1970. By 1980, there were 50,000 fewer students in the system than there had been a decade before. Although declining enrollment posed problems for school appropriations and raised the unpleasant question of school closings, it made the job of the school system that much easier. No longer did the schools need to figure out how to educate students for whom there were no seats.

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85/ On the competency-based curriculum, see special section "The Competency-Based Curriculum of the District of Columbia Public School System," of the Journal of Personalized Instruction 3, 4 (Winter 1978), pp. 197-218.

The improving situation in the schools, however, did not result in widespread change in the way the community, and particularly the daily press, viewed the schools. A number of highly publicized conflicts involving the schools fed the now well established image of school chaos: a major teachers strike in 1979, a renewal of Board in-fighting and negative publicity, the mayor's efforts to reduce substantially the schools appropriations in response to declining enrollments and the city's financial crisis, and the growing tensions between Reed and the Board resulting in Reed's departure in December of 1980. Each of these big "news" events cast the schools once again in a troubled light.

Press coverage and editorial comment about the schools in this period demonstrates a paradox. On the one hand, Reed received extremely favorable coverage and glowing editorial praise. On the other hand, the negative images of the schools themselves prevailed. In April of 1978, the Post published the single most devastating piece of negative school publicity in this period, a moving five part series by Juan Williams about Eastern High School entitled "Inside a Washington School." Williams portrayed "hall people" who never attended class, serious discipline problems, low teacher morale, and students in senior classes who could not read assignments without help. His most upsetting example, however, was the story of "Roger", a senior portrayed in the first article who could not read the signs on the busses he took to and from school. <sup>86/</sup> Of course, none of Williams' findings came as a surprise to people familiar with the schools' legacy of problems, and virtually no one recalled that the very example of a high school senior who could not read streetcar signs was cited by a

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86/ Post, April 30, May 1-4, 1978.

teacher in an article on reading problems in the white schools in 1948. To be sure, the problems were more severe in 1978 than they had been thirty years later. In 1948, however, public schools were not yet a sufficiently important subject and press attitudes toward them were not so clearly fixed for a paper to send a reporter into a school for three months to find the most dramatic examples possible of educational failure.

The schools' continuing image problems, despite the popularity of the superintendent, stemmed in part also from the tendency of the press and much of the public to side with the superintendent in his disputes with the Board of Education. In the twelve months before Reed's unexpected retirement, the Post, and to a lesser extent the Star published numerous editorials, columns and news-analyses of the Board, its manner of operation, and its cost. The message that an expensive, petty, and highly political Board interfered with the efforts of a good superintendent to upgrade the schools was repeated almost daily after Reed's announcement.

Even upbeat articles or editorials about Reed or Floretta D. McKenzie, his popular successor, would use adjectives like "troubled" routinely in referring to the school system, and much worse for the Board of Education. When, for example, the Post reported a generally positive interview with McKenzie, the reporter inserted after her name the phrase "fourth superintendent in the last six years", suggesting the pattern of unstable leadership that had characterized the years between Hansen and Reed. <sup>87/</sup> In fact, McKenzie was the third person to hold the job in the previous six years, and only the second one on a permanent basis. Moreover, the leadership change did not result in

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<sup>87/</sup> Ibid., December 5, 1981.

a major shift in the basic educational direction of the schools, nor was this its intent. Considering the extent of public pressure on the schools and the history of turmoil before 1975, the last six years have in fact been remarkably stable.

Or take this example of the press unable to break out of the long outdated cliches of the past. In January of 1982, the Post headlined its annual article on school enrollment trends "White Enrollment in City's Public Schools Takes Sharp Drop." The lead of the story read: "Despite a slight increase in Washington's white population, the number of white children attending the city's public schools has fallen sharply since 1977 after holding steady for the previous four years." The reporter did not mention, of course, that although the white population of the city had increased slightly, the white school age population of the city has declined. And what was the reporter's evidence of this "sharp drop?" In 1974, 3.3% of the schools' students were white, in 1980 3.6%, in 1981 3.5%. <sup>88/</sup> In the 1950's and 1960's, the declining proportion of white students was news, but minor fluctuations in the white enrollment since 1970 hardly seems worthy of consideration. Yet the uninformed reader wrongly concludes that things in the schools are getting worse, and that the few remaining people with choices are bailing out.

In the years after 1975, despite modest improvements in test scores, a popular superintendent, greater administrative stability and a new emphasis on basic skills and higher academic standards, the public schools had difficulty ridding themselves of their poor public image. In part this was because serious problems of student achievement and discipline remained, but it also grew out of the tendency of the press to seek out all the familiar "crisis" themes. Education remained a major political issue, and the hottest news items remained dramatic instances of educational failure or heated political exchanges among elected officials.

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88/ Post, January 6, 1982.

## Policy Implications:

### The Challenge of Restoring Confidence

There is widespread recognition among education leaders in Washington of the need to change the public image of the D.C. schools and to enhance public confidence in them. Although declining confidence in public schools is a well documented national problem, the problem is particularly strong in the District, stemming from the unique history of public education in this city since World War II.

A few points stand out sharply from this historical analysis. First, Washington's schools not only had to desegregate, absorb huge increases in low income students and make do with inadequate budgets and grossly inadequate facilities, but they had to do these things in the midst of a revolution of rising expectations of education, in which schools were now to be judged by the achievements of their students instead of the resources put into them. Moreover, the public's collective historical memory has been very poor. Despite abundant evidence of serious educational problems before desegregation, both blacks and whites tend to look back upon the past more selectively and therefore more fondly than is warranted and to compare the present unfavorably. Any serious attempt to change public attitudes toward the schools will have to increase public understanding of the shortcomings of education in the past.

Secondly, student scores on norm-referenced tests have for some time now been the primary arbiter of educational quality. Right or wrongly, the District schools can abandon or deemphasize test scores as a measure of achievement only at their peril. However, singleminded reliance on test scores as evidence of student achievement is dangerous, since any number of variables over which the schools have no control can affect the scores. The schools must develop a wider array of measures of student

achievement, and must convince the press and the public that judgements of achievement should not be so singleminded.

Thirdly, the quality of public education has been a hot political subject for many years now, and is likely to remain so. Under these conditions, the press will inevitably seek out conflict and controversy. Persons concerned about public education, and particularly the members of the Board of Education, must recognize that they are extremely visible and that the press will take every opportunity to report conflict. In the late 1960s and early 1970s that conflict served an important purpose in sensitizing the Board and the public to discriminatory aspects of the school system, and to the way in which schools failed large numbers of students. Even then, however, it exacted a price in public confidence. The price may have been worth paying then, but the schools cannot afford it now. Indeed the Board needs to take as one of its primary missions the job of selling the schools to the public and restoring confidence in public education.

Neither improvements in the quality of education or increased responsiveness to organized citizen groups is likely automatically to bring with it an improvement in the schools' reputation. The elected school board has been more responsive to organized constituencies than its appointed predecessor, and more criticized. Community control and decentralization plans have been implemented in various ways since the 1960's, but there is little evidence that these programs have increased public confidence in the schools. Improving the schools' reputation may be even more difficult than improving the schools themselves. The progress made under Reed's superintendency, and the failure of the press to transfer his personal popularity into greater confidence in the schools, suggest the dimensions of the task at hand.

Finally, for at least fifteen years now, the press has written about the growing popularity of non-public schools as a way of demonstrating the apparent discontent with the public schools, even though the proportion of school age Washingtonians attending non-public schools has been considerably lower in the last fifteen years than it was before the 1950s. Now that tax credits and vouchers are national educational issues, such comparisons will increase. In answering those who make these unfavorable comparisons, it will not be sufficient to explain that the public schools must take every child, that they cannot limit themselves to those whose parents have the desire and the means to send them to non-public institutions, and that they cannot expel disruptive students. The public schools will also have to recognize, and try to get the media to recognize, that non-public institutions can obscure their problems from the press and the public in a way that is not possible for public institutions.

When Washington Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle decided quietly to desegregate the Catholic schools in the late 1940s he feared adverse parent reaction. So he went to the publishers of the local newspapers, told them what he planned to do, and asked them to keep his story out of the papers. They agreed. <sup>89/</sup> Historian Constance M. Green, looking back on the desegregation of the Catholic schools, observed that it "aroused astonishingly little comment in the city." <sup>90/</sup> Even at that time it would have been inconceivable for the press to make such an arrangement with a public institution. The archdiocese schools have faced many of the problems of the public schools — expanding enrollments during the baby boom years and struggles over school closings since the 1970s, schools in the inner city going quickly from white to black, and criticism of a

<sup>89/</sup> Interview with Father Robert Nagel, Assistant Superintendent of Washington Archdiocese Schools, December, 1981.

<sup>90/</sup> Green, Secret City, p. 301.

parish system of school funding that resulted in much higher expenditures in affluent parish schools than in poor ones. Rarely, however, did these problems receive extended coverage, much less editorial comment, in the daily press. Acts of vandalism against public schools, to cite another example, are routinely reported in the news media, but recent incidents of vandalism by students at Sidwell Friends School, resulting in significant damage to school property, went entirely unnoticed by the press.

The fact is that public institutions are, and must be, subject to public scrutiny. When a public institution stands on the front lines of society's most difficult social problems and when the public expects it to do more and more, it cannot hope for the comforts of anonymity. It must struggle to shape its image and to interpret itself to the public. The D.C. public schools can only improve their image by improving student achievement, but improvement in student achievement alone will not be sufficient. An aggressive public relations program and a new awareness of the schools' vulnerability to negative publicity are also needed to overcome in the public mind the legacy of crisis.

**THE D.C. HISTORY AND PUBLIC POLICY PROJECT**

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