

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

*FOR THE BENEFIT OF THESE CHILDREN:
AFFIRMING RACIAL IDENTITY IN THE ERA
OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION, PRINCE
GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND, 1954-1974*

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This history examines attitudes toward and responses to school desegregation within an established, closely knit network of African-American communities in Prince George's County, Maryland, from 1954, immediately after *Brown v. Board of Education*, through the first year of the destabilizing busing era. Optimistic about the opportunities and social equality desegregated schooling might afford their children, black residents of this county nonetheless recognized the value of segregated schooling in securing a general sense of well being within both their children and their communities. Thus, for two decades they approached school desegregation with expectation and ambivalence, asserting collective agency to influence the school board's decision making, prevent the closing of black schools, and affirm their racial and cultural identity.

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PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND, 1954-1974*

by

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Dedication

To my parents, Jean Ann Gray Matthews and Carroll Sylvester Matthews, for always valuing their stories.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In June 1992, journalist David Dent touted Prince George's County, Maryland, as "the closest thing to utopia that black middle-class families could find in America." The planners of a 1980s economic development strategy that aimed at selling homes in a new development to buyers with income in the "mid- to high-level executive" range did not anticipate the majority of the buyers would be black families with the income to afford such residences, but they were. While a white county resident and real estate agent told Dent she viewed this trend in new-home ownership as an "opportunity to show the rest of the country that integration can work," a black homeowner scoffed at "this notion that we are aiming toward an integrated county."¹

The black homeowner's frank sentiment might have surprised residents who had lived in Prince George's two decades earlier, when desegregating the county's public schools was the dominant topic among families, policy makers, educators, and others throughout the expansive region just outside the Nation's Capital.

Two years after this article was published, Wayne K. Curry, a black real estate attorney, millionaire, and graduate of the county school system, was elected county executive, the first black person to hold the office. Curry's first formal encounter with local government had come in the summer of 1959, when he was nine years old. Several black families in the segregated Ward 4 section of the town of Cheverly, where he lived, had asked the county board of education for permission to transfer their children to the whites-only Cheverly-Tuxedo Elementary School, which was

1. David Dent, "The New Black Suburbs," *New York Times*, June 14, 1992.

nearer their homes, rather than have the children continue to walk outside their neighborhood to the school designated for black children.

One of the parents seeking the board's permission was Eugene "Bull" Curry, Wayne's father. The Currys' Ward 4 home was only a few blocks from the all-black Fairmont Heights High School, where Bull Curry taught shop. His employment with the school system carried no sway, however. The board of education denied the parents' transfer requests. Bull Curry threatened to sue the county, at the risk of being fired. Before school opened in September though, the board had relented, granting the transfers.²

For the remainder of his school years, through elementary, junior high, and high school, Wayne Curry would attend school with the new classmates he met when he was nine, the majority of whom were white. When his peers in Ward 4 and several other black neighborhoods nearby were enrolling at Fairmont Heights High,³ Curry was enrolling in the predominantly white Bladensburg High. His senior year, 1967-

2. Leila P. Price and Fred Price, Jr., "A History of Old Ward Four, Town of Cheverly, Md." Cheverly History, Last modified March 10, 2017. <https://sites.google.com/site/cheverlyhistory/Home/histories-of-cheverly/a-history-of-the-old-fourth-ward>, accessed October 16, 2016.

3. The spelling of the high school, "Fairmont" instead of "Fairmount," as the town is spelled, is attributed to a desire to maintain consistency with the spelling of Fairmont Heights Elementary School. An incorrect signage order during construction of the elementary school in 1924 led to the naming inconsistency. "Fairmont Heights High School," Maryland Historical Trust, Maryland Inventory of Historical Properties, accessed October 14, 2017. <https://mht.maryland.gov/secure/medusa/PDF/Prince%20Georges/Pg;72-64.pdf>.

68, Curry was one of 240 black students among the 2,200 students enrolled. He was senior class vice-president, and the president, his best friend, was white.⁴

This thesis explores what school desegregation meant to black students, parents, teachers, and communities in Prince George's County, Maryland, over the twenty years following the 1954 U. S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The scale, scope, and weight of the *Brown* decision compels a close look at how people whose ancestry in the region preceded the county's establishment in 1696 interpreted desegregation as a social concept, as well as how they engaged with the process of desegregating their schools.

A number of scholarly works discuss the history and development of African-American life in Prince George's County, including captive importation in the mid-1600s; thriving enslaved and free within the western-shore, tobacco-driven economy; emancipation, community building, and schooling; suburbanization and politicization; employment and enterprise; and the attainment of personal wealth in the late twentieth century. Yet, there is no scholarly literature that reveals how local and federal policies two decades before court intervention in 1972 shaped this black community's attitudes about desegregation, determined their actions on behalf of their children, schools, and neighborhoods; and influenced the social conditions of the larger community in the years that followed.

4. "Notes – Meeting, Supt. Schmidt and HEW" (July 25, 1968), Box 7, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland.

The Prince George's County, Maryland, school district was among the ten largest school districts in the nation in the early 1970s. Along with two other large East Coast school systems -- Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, and Boston, Massachusetts -- Prince George's County drew persistent and conspicuous media coverage for the federal-court orders regarding the desegregation of its public schools and for citizens' reactions to those orders. These court decisions compelled the districts to transport children to schools in communities that were geographically, racially, and ideologically apart and different from the communities where they lived. Throughout the 1970s, school desegregation was a crucial civil rights battle in "an undefeated but unfinished revolution," historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues. Its outcomes could have more critical and lasting effects on American society than the protection of voting rights.⁵

Yet, while scholars have examined efforts to desegregate schools in Charlotte and Boston before court-ordered busing in the 1970s, none has critically examined the history of school desegregation in Prince George's County prior to 1972. In particular, there are no in-depth, scholarly studies of African-American community engagement with school desegregation policies, processes, and outcomes during the eighteen years between the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and court-ordered busing in 1972.⁶ Nor is there a scholarly account of how blacks in Prince George's

5. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1263.

6. Herbert H. Denton, "NAACP Sues County, Asks More Integration," *Washington Post*, March 30, 1972.

County interpreted the *Brown* ruling and the notion of desegregation, nor of black residents' interactions with the county school board during this period. This thesis finally does that work.

Adding to the existing analyses of how desegregated classrooms impacted black-student achievement, residential patterns, racial relations, and black political and economic empowerment, my research strives to contextualize these analyses by presenting personal perspectives on how black people interpreted and engaged with the process of desegregating their local schools. Focusing on several black communities that were north of the county's central corridor and spread out within ten miles of each other, I examine correspondence produced by citizens, the board of education, school system employees, and government officials, as well as newspaper reports and oral histories. I argue in this thesis that these communities were consistently involved with the process of desegregating public schools two decades before court-ordered busing went into effect in January 1973.⁷ Moreover, I contend that Prince George's black citizens met desegregation with not only optimism and determination, but also with trepidation. Recognizing Thurgood Marshall's color-blind impetus in arguing *Brown v. Board of Education*, as well as his commitment to racial equality, many also recognized the capacity of desegregation to undermine their racial and cultural identity. Black Prince George's residents assertively resisted that effect. They advocated for the educational interests of their children and affirmed

7. The communities studied in this thesis do not comprise the sum of black communities in Prince George's County during school desegregation; however, in many ways they are representative of those communities. Further, some students who lived in those communities attended the same schools discussed here.

pride in their communities, their schools, and their race until the mid-1970s. At that point, attainment of personal wealth among a segment of the black population produced visible class divisions and conflicting priorities, thus diluting efforts toward ensuring accountability to black children and communities in their pursuit of quality education.

This examination of these black communities' experiences during the era of school desegregation is grounded in the theories of sociologist Walter Allen, who argues:

"The special circumstances that characterize Black family life in the United States, both historically and today, warrant – indeed require – that these families be examined in relation to their environments. Where this is done, one can expect clearer understandings of Black family experiences. African American families display an incredible diversity of value orientations, goals, behavioral patterns, structural arrangements, geographic locations, and socioeconomic statuses. [However,] this is not to ignore the elements which are common to all African American families – those qualities that join them and distinguish them from other families in the society.⁸

Sociologist Mary Pattillo-McCoy presents such an examination in *Black Picket Fences*, exploring the social conditions of an overlooked, post-World War II black middle-class community in a crime-prone, economically unstable inner-city neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. She asserts that this group's family-oriented, crime-averse values align with those of black middle-class suburban dwellers. Further, she argues that the urban black middle-class is neither as spatially distant nor economically disparate from the black suburban middle-class as social scientists have

8. Walter R. Allen, "African American Family Life in Societal Context: Crisis and Hope," *Sociological Forum: Official Journal of the Eastern Sociological Society* 10, no. 4 (1995): 579.

reported and the suburban residents have believed themselves to be.

Pattillo-McCoy also enables a more subjective, non-statistical view of the black middle-class as a whole, defining them as people who "mow their lawns, go to church, marry, vote, work, own property," and who "labor diligently to maintain their families, their investments, their neighborhood, and to further their achievements."⁹ However, she also notes that whether the black middle-class lives in the midst of poorer, crime-ridden neighborhoods, as do the families in her study, or in quieter, more economically secure and socially homogenous suburban housing developments, neither group is as economically secure as the white middle class. "The public celebration of black middle-class ascendance has perhaps been too hasty," Pattillo-McCoy suggests.¹⁰

Discrimination in employment, wages, lending, and housing policies, as well as ineffective anti-poverty programs continue to keep the black middle-class from securing the same degree of social and economic stability as whites. Discussing the possibility of residential integration as a start to enabling greater degrees of black stability, she is careful to stipulate that "blacks, like whites, also indicate preferences for residential situations in which they are the majority," and "that there also are social, cultural, and psychological rewards to living in a neighborhood that celebrates

9. Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5.

10. *Ibid*, 2.

black history and culture."¹¹

Evidence from Prince George's County echoes some of Pattillo-McCoy's research in Chicago. Prince George's County's post-1970s middle-class suburbs were economically fragile, and black leaders' acrimonious, class-motivated debates regarding increased busing in 1979, discussed in Chapter Twelve, seem futile, as both class distinctions among blacks and wealth gains were negligible.

My findings lead me to concur with Pattillo-McCoy's argument that black middle-class communities up to the mid-1970s were socially ordered around kinship and friendship. Moreover, in Prince George's – not unlike the communities in her study – neighborhoods have perpetuated familial and generational connectedness into the twenty-first century, even as new residents representing different national, ethnic, and economic demographics, as well as conflicting communal values, arrived. In Prince George's County, this pattern is evidenced in the many community-day celebrations held annually in North Brentwood, Lakeland, North Englewood, Glenarden, Carsondale, and other historically black neighborhoods. More than gatherings for the current residents, these events reunite at least eight generations of former neighbors, residents, friends, and classmates. Nostalgia also motivated several residents of Glenarden to organize in 2010 an annual reunion of the thousands of students from multiple black neighborhoods who attended DuVal High during the 1970s, the decade that saw the first significant increase in the percentages of students

11. Ibid, 218.

attending desegregated schools, as well as the highest percentages of desegregation in consecutive years.¹²

Neighborhood dynamics also were significant in the research of education scholar Deirdre Dougherty, who contends that educational policies since *Brown* were "underpinned by assumptions of the inferiority of black educational and residential spaces." Analyzing the attitudes of Prince George's County policy makers toward Model Cities communities, which included Fairmount Heights, Dougherty writes:

The way these racialized spaces came to be represented both reflected and reproduced the general perception of a lack of qualified educators in the black community which, among other factors, continued to ensure that the integration of schools would be a one-way endeavor. Moreover, this had also naturalized the idea of black students' educational inferiority.¹³

This research also joins the well-known narratives that came out of Little Rock and Boston, as well as many lesser-known narratives throughout the country, in exposing the persistent and hegemonic nature of white resistance to desegregation. In revealing the interactions between community, policy makers, and government, it also connects with desegregation scholarship that explores the ways in which African Americans interpreted the actions of their school districts; advocated for their

12. Cheryl LaChae Jones, "Must Achievement Gaps Persist? The Struggle for Educational Reform in Prince George's County, Maryland," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland College Park, 2011 (accessed September 29, 2017 <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/11703>.)

13. Deirdre Dougherty, "Desegregation in a 'Model City': School Closure and the Abstract Space of Black Schooling in Prince George's County, Maryland, 1968," Paper presented at the History of Education Society Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri. November 2015, accessed February 14, 2016. www.academia.edu/24299296/Desegregation_in_a_Model_City_School_Closure_and_the_Abstract_Space_of_Black_Schooling_in_Prince_George_s_County_Maryland_1968.

children, schools, and communities; and strategized to directly engage with policy makers and influence the desegregation decision making.

Since the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*, members of the Prince George's County school board had been required to negotiate their personal and political beliefs, as well as the conventions of the communities they represented, with the high court's conclusion that "the opportunity of education" was a right, and that maintaining racially segregated schools inherently and illegally denied that right.¹⁴ As in many other places around the country, the possibility of desegregating the Prince George's County public schools and establishing them as part of a "microcosm of a broad and diverse community" was impeded by intentional adherence to southern, racial power dynamics, as well as illogical and uninformed interpretations of black schools, black families, and black communities.¹⁵

In exploring racial and cultural identity within the context of school desegregation, however, this study joins education scholar David Callejo-Perez in contesting the typical depiction of desegregation as a fight between "white resisters" and "black activists." Callejo-Perez argues that people's feelings on the issue might not have been as obvious as skin color, neighborhood, or income.¹⁶ Thus, it is reasonable to ask not only what school desegregation meant to black Prince George's

14. Juan Williams, *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* (New York: Times Books, 1998), 226.

15. Howell Baum, *Brown in Baltimore: School Desegregation and the Limits of Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 16.

16. David Callejo-Perez, *Southern Hospitality: Identity, Schools, and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, 1964-1972* (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 4.

residents but also the extent to which fostering racial conciliation and a color-blind society were their goals, as many have suggested.

Blacks in the county and throughout the country grasped the significance of eliminating systemic inequities in public education, and equalizing the educational, professional, and social opportunities afforded by a formal education. Yet, my study, along with the work of such scholars as H. Richard Milner and Tyrone C. Howard – asks how African-Americans imagined the dispersal of black children and teachers into social space from which they had long been barred would affect the essential “nexus between families, neighborhoods, and schools,” and how their notions changed, if at all, as desegregation went forward?¹⁷

As early as 1935, almost two decades before Thurgood Marshall and the legal team for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People drove home their winning argument in *Brown*, W.E.B. DuBois derided the benefits of racial desegregation in education, suggesting that “a finer, better balance of spirit; an infinitely more capable and rounded personality” would result from “putting children in schools where they are wanted, and where they are happy and inspired, [rather] than thrusting them into hells where they are ridiculed and hated.”¹⁸ The year after the

17. H. Richard Milner and Tyrone C. Howard, “Black Teachers, Black Students, Black Communities, and Brown: Perspectives and Insights from Experts,” *Journal of Negro Education* 73, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 291.

18. W.E.B. DuBois, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools,” *Journal of Negro Education* 4, no. 3 (July 1935): 328-335, accessed August 18, 2016, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1917beyond/essays/does-the-negro-need-seperate-schools.pdf>.

Brown decision, the writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston declared in the *Orlando Sentinel* that she had neither "sympathy nor respect for the 'tragedy of color' school of thought." Hurston, whose hometown was Eatonville, Florida, the nation's first incorporated all-black town, criticized Marshall and the Supreme Court for not addressing what she saw as the larger issue, "enforcing the compulsory education provisions for Negroes in the South as is done for white children."¹⁹

Much of the black public responded to the *Brown* decision with support and appreciation. Benjamin Mays, educator and thought leader in the civil rights movement, recalled that after the *Brown* decision, "people literally got out and danced in the streets" in celebration. "The Negro was jubilant," Mays recalled. Yet, Aldon Morris points out that Mays also "clearly saw the limitations of the case before the decision was rendered ... [and Mays] maintained that even if the decision was favorable it would apply directly only to the five cases before the Court; the problem of residential segregation would remain, and blacks would probably have a tendency to withdraw pressure once they had gained the legal right to attend non-segregated schools."²⁰

Twenty-first century scholars have challenged the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education* on a number of grounds. Among its less-than-monumental outcomes and effects, observers note, were the undermining tactics of white legislators and

19. Zora Neale Hurston, "Letter to the Orlando Sentinel," *Orlando Sentinel* (August 11, 1955): accessed March 31, 2016, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-the-orlando-sentinel>.

20. Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 81.

judges across the country, who, among other things, approved the reappropriation of public funds to private schools that excluded black students, cut off resources to schools in black communities, suspended school bus service for black children, and caused both the resegregation of public schools and "the relegation of blacks to an inferior public school system."²¹

Civil rights attorney Derrick Bell came to view *Brown* as "a disaster for the schooling of black children," saying in 2004 that he regretted his success in arguing school desegregation cases as an NAACP attorney in the 1960s, victories that "resulted in the closing of black schools and the dismissal of thousands of black teachers and administrators." Bell recalled that "when the black children who were the beneficiaries of those court orders were admitted to previously all-white schools, they often faced hostility and only infrequently found a teaching environment that was conducive to their needs. . . . Black children were disproportionately disciplined, and there was little attention given to black cultural interests."²²

A number of studies also have asserted that blacks' perceptions of desegregation cannot be processed solely through the lens of Thurgood Marshall's NAACP, which projected racial integration in schools as a seismic social movement capable of ending racial segregation and injustice in the larger society. Yet, the success or failure of school desegregation must be explored at a micro level.

21. Callejo-Perez, 119.

22. Derrick A. Bell, Jr., "I Keynote Addresses – The Unintended Lessons in *Brown v. Board of Education*," *New York Law School Law Review* 49, no. 4 (2005): 1053.

Historians Andrew Highsmith and Ansley Erickson take this approach in revealing how local government officials in Flint, Michigan, from the 1930s into the early 1970s, engaged in the practices of "splitting and joining," drastically manipulating school district boundaries to ensure that black and white students in adjacent neighborhoods attended separate schools, while also deliberately creating suburban enclaves of whiteness and social democracy that also were characterized by racial exclusivity.

Following this rationale of calculated segregation, I argue that the assertions of Prince George's County school officials that residential segregation was solely to blame for the extent of segregated schooling only "mask[ed]" the government's role in upholding the color line."²³

The school board in Flint revealed as earnest a commitment to segregation as to community spirit, refusing to relieve overcrowding in white schools that were located near black or integrated neighborhoods and justifying their actions by claiming black schools taught only remedial curricula. School district leaders in Prince George's County used similar rationale in refusing to enforce the transfer of white students from the predominantly white, overcrowded Bladensburg High to the predominantly black, under-enrolled Fairmont Heights High, deeming the instructional programs at Fairmont Heights to be inadequate.

23. Andrew R. Highsmith and Ansley T. Erickson, "Segregation As Splitting, Segregation as Joining: Schools, Housing, and the Many Modes of Jim Crow," *American Journal of Education* 121, no. 4 (2015): 563.

In a separate study, Erickson also argued that analyses of desegregation's successes and failures must consider how local planning and development agencies collaborated to ensure segregated neighborhoods would remain that way, actions that provided school district officials the means and rationale to sustain segregation. "In Nashville," Erikson explained, "statistical desegregation was tried, and in many respects secured. But what was not tried was desegregation in the context of a robust commitment to equality of educational opportunity, with careful attention to the quality of students' experiences in schools and the continued effort toward desegregation alongside public recognition of and value for all of a metropolis's communities and children."²⁴

My study of Prince George's County concludes, similarly, that a strong commitment to equality of educational opportunity was never in evidence. Yet, the situation in Prince George's was very different from Nashville in that the desegregation effort ultimately changed the racial composition of the county. The trajectory of race relations in Prince George's turned out to be so different from that in Nashville that my study remains unique.

Erikson goes on to assert that defining education equality in the twenty-first century requires asking different questions, an imperative political scientist Alvin Thornton and educator Eva Wells Chunn made in their 1988 discussion on the effort to ensure education equality in Prince George's County in the years after the 1972 desegregation court order, when the county's steadily increasing black population

24. Ansley T. Erickson, *Making the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits*. Historical Studies of Urban America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 305.

eclipsed the fast-declining white population, making it impossible to maintain court-ordered racial quotas within county schools.

My inquiry into blacks' education activism before court-ordered busing also joins Zebulon Miletsky's look at the fight for education equality in Boston, which black Bostonians had begun waging two decades before *Brown* and which girded them for the city's busing battle of the 1970s. Miletsky challenges the gilded narrative of Boston as the nation's seat of democracy and social civility, observing that "the presentation of a counter-narrative that foregrounds black community agency and activism helps to construct a more complete historical understanding of the role played by those residents who were most affected by the resistance to the [1970s busing] court order and least mentioned in most accounts of school desegregation—black Bostonians."²⁵ Centering the communities and activists in Prince George's County prior to court-ordered busing furthers Miletsky's intent to bring to the forefront the stories that have been obscured by the sheer scale of the legal dramas desegregation sparked.

Historian Tess Bundy also focuses on a lesser-known Boston desegregation story, assessing compulsory desegregation as a possible cause for the dissolution of black communities and their institutions. Bundy observes that desegregation disregarded the value of black schools, which had "provided local communities important central meeting places, represented a crucial site of communal cooperation

25. Zebulon V. Miletsky, "Before Busing: Boston's Long Movement for Civil Rights and the Legacy of Jim Crow in the 'Cradle of Liberty,'" *Journal of Urban History* 43, no. 2 (2017): 204–217.

and ownership, and offered tangible economic opportunities for African Americans, both as sources of employment for educators and as means to ensure students' future economic mobility."²⁶ She asserts that Boston's African-American communities before the early 1970s had steadily pressed their local officials to guarantee the rights enacted by *Brown*. Black parents were neither “passive victims nor apathetic bystanders” regarding the desegregation of schools, but assertively interacted with the people who were making the policies affecting their children's schooling, Bundy asserts.²⁷

Further arguing that Boston's black parents were education activists before the city's busing controversy of the mid-1970s, Bundy reveals that black Bostonians were not primarily driven by a desire for desegregation but by a determination to directly shape their children's education. She also uncovers how black parents, challenging the conventional assumption that policy makers would act in their children's best interest, put before city officials their own informed knowledge of what was best for their children.²⁸

My evidence reveals that Prince George's County's black communities were deeply committed to public education and succeeded in making it available to their children a century before *Brown*. However, the more fervent and steady efforts to

26. Lauren Tess Bundy, "The Schools Are Killing Our Kids! The African American Fight for Self-Determination in the Boston Public Schools, 1949-1985," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland College Park, 2014 (accessed August 12, 2016 doi:10.13016/M26S3K.y.).

27. *Ibid*, 2.

28. *Ibid*, 187.

secure *equality* in the education of black children came after *Brown*. Black Bostonians, on the other hand, had launched their community-based activism in the post-World War II period. Driven in Boston by grassroots, culture-centered groups, and in Prince George's County by civic and civil rights organizations, the black residents of both communities employed direct action to break through institutional racism and secure educational rights.

Although not all black parents in either jurisdiction felt comfortable engaging with the personnel at their children's desegregated schools, some parents in both school districts found individual advocacy for their children to be essential in forcing policy changes. Nonetheless, within a decade of the court's initial desegregation order in Prince George's County, class-based power struggles among blacks destroyed the opportunity for greater parental and community empowerment.

Desegregation in Boston also led Mathew Delmont and Jeanne Theoharis to assert that white Bostonians' resistance to court-ordered busing provided them, and city officials, with an acceptable rationale to publicly oppose the very idea of school desegregation. The authors show that, contrary to long-accepted narratives, opposition to busing in the 1960s and 1970s was not concentrated within ethnic and working-class white communities but also spread throughout middle-class and wealthy white communities. Similarly, in Prince George's County, intense opposition to desegregation and busing, racist rhetoric, and obstructionist intentions characterized the majority-white, solidly professional, middle-class suburb of Cheverly, where schools superintendent William S. Schmidt lived, as much as it did working-class Mount Rainier.

Discussing the influence of community on blacks' attitudes toward desegregation, Callejo-Perez has argued that "place shaped the psychology of black identity prior to the integration of schools."²⁹ He cites Barbara J. Fields' claim that place "is a psychological condition that 'grew up out of concrete historical conditions and interests.'"³⁰ Fields, following John Hope Franklin, suggests that blacks were as susceptible as whites to the South's "well-defined codes of conduct."³¹ An apt example of this conduct is found in an October 9, 1915, article on the Prince George's County Colored Schools, published in the *Washington Bee*, a weekly newspaper that covered black community news in and around the city. James F. Armstrong, who was the black Supervisor of Colored Schools in Prince George's County intermittently between 1914 and 1919, had "received both praise and criticism from the local black press and the constituents of the Fairmount Heights School,"³² where he also oversaw the industrial training department. Armstrong was known to abuse his authority over the black staff he supervised.

According to the article in the *Bee*, when he found out one of the school's black trustees had mishandled the hiring of a new teacher, Armstrong informed the

29. Callejo-Perez, 13.

30. Ibid, 10.

31. Ibid, 12. This notion is based in John Hope Franklin's theory of a unique, fabricated Southern consciousness, a "unification of nationalism and honor," that employs order as a means of deflecting "the slightest suggestion of irregularity in his honesty and integrity."

32. The article references Fairmount Heights Elementary School, which opened in 1912, a two-story building with large classrooms on each floor.

white superintendent about the matter and was "ordered" to go to the school and resolve the situation. Referring to Armstrong as "the messenger supervisor," the October 5 edition of the *Bee* offered a summary of the meeting he had with the parties involved:

R.F. Plummer, who came here to represent a teacher at Fairmount Heights, was successful in defeating William F. Armstrong and one of his pet trustees, who doesn't know where he stood. The citizens of Prince George's County are making a fight to remove Armstrong, and have a representative board of trustees for Fairmount Heights appointed. The consensus of opinion here is that this is Armstrong's last year. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction against him. His patronizing attitude is disgusting colored people here. All of Armstrong's pet propositions were defeated. He has lost with the people. He never was their choice.³³

Black Prince Georgians negotiating desegregation and its meanings fifty years later also were motivated to rebuke such patronage.

Urban geographer Joe T. Darden, examining perceptions of communities and schools from another angle, concluded in a 1981 study that "racial differences in attitudes toward schools are associated not only with race per se but also with the racial composition of neighborhoods."³⁴ Blacks in Prince George's, whose neighborhoods through the 1970s were largely segregated, shared group values and a group identity that influenced their sense of citizenship, as well as their attitudes

33. *Washington Bee*, "Marlboro, Md., News," October 9, 1915, African American Newspapers, University of Maryland College Park, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>, accessed October 14, 2016.

34. Joe T. Darden and Margaret A. Parsons, "The Effect of Neighborhood Racial Composition on Black and White Attitudes," *The Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education* 13, no. 2 (1981): 103–9, accessed October 5, 2016, doi:10.1007/BF01956011.

toward education, school, and desegregation. Motivated by social and civic imperatives, and racial pride, they aspired to recast an identity that, as Callejo-Perez argued, had been built upon an oppressive social reality, and they saw desegregating schools as a way to activate that new identity.³⁵

In sum, in this thesis I argue that African-American parents, teachers, students, and community leaders in Prince George's County generally supported desegregation in the period between 1954 and 1974 but faced it with trepidation and ambivalence because, for all its promise of greater resources and social equality, desegregation also threatened violence; discrimination within schools; the loss of the community cohesion and solidarity that supported black children in a racist society; the loss of employment opportunities for educators and support staff; and the loss of curricula and extra-curricular activities that valued black lives and refuted racist versions of American culture.

I also argue that over time ambivalence manifested in different ways among different groups of African-American parents. When some saw the voluntary way that desegregation was going to be implemented in the early 1960s, for instance, very few participated. Most did not see this method as one that promised to improve the educational opportunities of their children. Still, the lack of enthusiasm for a particular desegregation plan did not reflect opposition to the *Brown* decision. Moreover, I argue that retaining schools in black communities was a major commitment of African-American Prince Georgians, and that when methods of

35. Callejo-Perez, 15.

desegregation meant the loss of schools in black neighborhoods, black parents, teachers, and students generally resisted.

Chapter 2: Social and Historical Contexts

Black Americans during the first half of the twentieth century resided in major urban centers, busy small towns, and rural communities. In addition, they resided in geographically distinct semi-rural communities on the immediate outskirts of urban centers. The economic and physical infrastructures of these sub-urban communities were typically less stable than the same in white communities, yet these spaces enabled black families to live day to day independent of white influence on such essential life functions as socializing, mating, child rearing, worshipping, and schooling. In Prince George's County, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C., the sense of place, ownership, and safety these small communities afforded black citizens helped shape and define group and individual identity, and the segregated community schools contributed significantly to this process.

A century before *Brown v. Board of Education*, African Americans in Prince George's County had established communities and structured their lives within social and economic situations that, though not easily distinguishable from the conditions of enslavement, enabled their independence, stability, and endurance. After emancipation, there was, for instance, little lag in their efforts to secure formal education. The first school for black children, funded by the Freedmen's Bureau, opened in Bladensburg in 1866, and the school's "black leadership ... specifically requested a black teacher."³⁶ Over the next several years, at least six more schools, some of them affiliated with black United Methodist and African Methodist

36. Floyd, 28. The Bureau hired a white teacher from Philadelphia, who had written a letter asking for a position as a teacher of Maryland's freed blacks.

Episcopal congregations, opened in Upper Marlboro and neighboring towns in the southern section of the county, with assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau and the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of Colored People. Within the first quarter of the twentieth century, African-American communities in the central and northern sections of the county also financed the construction of schools and the hiring of teachers. They built homes, churches, and communities; worked; helped finance the construction of the schools they attended; nurtured families and friendships; and within their own organizations participated in the same types of leisure and recreation as whites in the county.

In 1903, the residents of Lakeland, Maryland, a small, turn-of-the century black community along U.S. Route 1 and a few minutes' drive from Washington, D.C., built a one-room elementary school, which they expanded to two rooms in 1917. In 1925, with support from the Julius Rosenwald Fund and supplemental financing from the county, they constructed an even larger building. Lakeland was situated within the municipal boundaries of College Park and directly across from the main campus of the University of Maryland. In 1928, Lakeland residents and the residents of several other black communities along or near Route 1 pooled their savings with county funds and a second Rosenwald grant to build Lakeland High School, one of the county's first high schools for blacks. The attendance zone stretched about twenty-five miles northward along Route 1, from the black town of North Brentwood, less than two miles from the Washington, D.C., city line, into

Howard County, and included no fewer than seven black communities along that route.

Historian Andrew Wiese found that by 1940, “more than a million African Americans lived in suburban areas, and suburbanites represented one-fifth of the black population in the metropolitan United States.”³⁷ Included in that number were residents of several early Prince George’s County communities, including North Brentwood, Glenarden, and Fairmount Heights. North Brentwood was developed on land that set aside by its owner, a Union army officer, for purchase by the black soldiers who had served in his unit. It became in 1924 the county's first incorporated all-black municipality. Fairmount Heights, settled in the 1910s and 1920s at Washington, D.C.'s northeast-southeast point, was incorporated in 1935 and was a particularly enterprising and politically active community. The town of Glenarden, a trolley-car suburb, was first subdivided in the 1910s along the Washington, Baltimore, and Annapolis Electric Railroad and became an incorporated municipality in 1939. Lincoln and Buena-Vista, adjacent communities, also were situated along the WB&A line. Thomas Junius Calloway, an American statesman, former college president, and friend of Booker T. Washington, cleverly marketed the communities' bucolic lots by offering free train tickets to passengers passing through Lincoln traveling to and from Baltimore.

By the 1960s, with the security and stability afforded by veterans' benefits and federal government employment, African Americans who had grown up in those and

37. Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 5.

other early Prince George's black communities situated within ten miles north and east of D.C., were resettling in those communities or moving into new housing developments within close proximity to them. Wiese notes that "black communities established by one generation served as the geographic and social foundation for the next."³⁸ Young black families in the District of Columbia desiring suburban space to rear their families also were settling in Prince George's newer housing communities. Allowing for the illegal real estate practices that "steered" black homebuyers to all-black communities,³⁹ these black residents were deliberate in choosing segregated neighborhoods, where "they could reap the benefits of middle-class lifestyles, could stay connected to African-American cultural traditions promoted by other black suburbanites, and, quite significantly, shield themselves from much of the racial bigotry they would face in white suburbs," historian Robert Gregg explains.⁴⁰

Conrad Briggs of Glenarden recalls that it was this sense of racial consciousness that in 1963 drew his father to Prince George's County from Washington, D.C. Five years old in 1963 when his parents moved the family from Benning Heights in Washington's southeast neighborhood to a newly built home in Glenarden, not a half-hour away, Conrad reflected on his father's motivations:

38. Ibid, 3.

39. "Steering" was a real estate practice in which agents using coded and surreptitious marketing strategies intentionally directed white and black homeowners to different housing communities, aiding in the perpetuation of segregated neighborhoods. Title VIII of the 1968 Fair Housing Act made it illegal to use a person's race as a decisive factor in either selling, renting, or marketing housing property to them.

40. Robert Gregg, "The New African American Middle Class," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 46 (Nov. 14-20, 1998): 2936.

He was looking for security. He wanted to be around black people. He wanted his own home. He wanted to be involved in his government. He wanted a say ... that feeling of enfranchisement, I think he would say, never having had that before, [but, as a renter,] having that, 'A white man can walk into your house anytime.' Not in Glenarden! This little enclave offered him that.⁴¹

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Prince George's had "rapidly develop[ed] as a bedroom community of Washington, D.C." First maintaining a post-Reconstruction decline that reached a census-record low of eight percent in 1960, the black population rebounded to fourteen percent in 1970.⁴² In 1968, Carl Sims of the *Washington Post*, offered a thoughtful and nuanced socioeconomic classification of blacks in Prince George's County: (1) middle class blacks "seek to prevent formation of a new ghetto, are wary of 'black power' separatism and are willing to seek solutions to their problems through traditional channels; (2) the working class "are willing to try conventional channels but are quick to read racism in bureaucracy and delay"; and (3) rural residents, "bound most tightly by a legacy of poverty and discrimination ... are just beginning to be heard."⁴³

41. Conrad Briggs, interview with author, Glenarden, Maryland, March 7, 2016.

42. Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, *Emerging Trends: The Many Faces of Prince George's County* 1, no. 1 (September 2004), 1. Accessed Sept. 27, 2016, <http://www.mnccppcapps.org/planning/publications/pdfs/96/Emerging%20Trends.pdf>.

43. Carl Sims, "Negroes Build Strength in Prince George's," *Washington Post*, November 28, 1968.

Many suburban black families' preference for living among other blacks combined with de facto and de jure segregation to limit black children's interactions with whites. Until court-ordered school desegregation in the 1970s brought them into daily interaction with significant numbers of white children and adults, much of what black children in Prince George's County knew about whites they learned from older relatives, neighbors, and teachers who encountered whites in work and public spaces, although likely in discriminatory contexts. Television after the 1950s also informed young black children about white Americans, although from a narrow and propagandistic perspective. Still, it was within their homes, communities, churches, schools, and organizations that black children's racial and cultural identity, as well as attitudes, were defined and developed.

Benay Gray Hawkins and twins Maxine and Delphine Gross grew up in the late 1950s and the 1960s in the all-black community of Lakeland, in College Park, near the University of Maryland. Until junior high, they attended school within their community and experienced their community and schools as nurturing and protective. Benay, who was born in 1954, the year of *Brown*, recalls, "Black and white wasn't ingrained in us." Getting on the streetcar to go shopping downtown, she says she "can't even remember seeing white people. ... You didn't focus on them being white and you being black." She believes Lakeland "definitely" sheltered her from racism, just as many black families and communities shielded children from the racial dystopia that writer Ralph Ellison depicted in 1952's *Invisible Man*.

If anything, for some in the community, Lakeland allowed a sense of utopia. "All we knew was ourselves. There was no sense that anything was missing," Benay

says.⁴⁴ Delphine recalls a few whites coming into the community in the early 1970s, including an insurance man collecting policy premiums, and, in the 1960s, white University of Maryland students, "probably from the school of education," who volunteered as tutors for elementary children. Black students from the university eventually took over the tutoring program, and "the lessons started to focus more on issues of black culture," Delphine remembers. "Growing up in Lakeland gave me a sense of myself," she adds. "It just never occurred to me that white people were better than we were. We were cherished."⁴⁵ Maxine notes, "We had everything we needed."⁴⁶

Charles James' racial identity was cemented in the early 1960s within his family home in Lanham; at the segregated Lincoln Elementary; and at the family church in Washington, D.C. Lanham was then a large area of incorporated and unincorporated communities in close proximity to the black neighborhoods of Lincoln, Vista, Carsondale, and Glenarden; and also near Glen Dale and Bowie, where blacks and whites had long lived in segregated sections. His parents had migrated to the area from Texas in the mid-1940s, and for them, Charles says, "being here and not in Texas was like, 'We made it!'" His father built their home on property that was purchased from a local black minister, Rev. Johnson, who "had in their

44. Benay Gray Hawkins, interview with author, College Park, Maryland, March 26, 2016.

45. Delphine Gross, interview with author, College Park, Maryland, March 27, 2016.

46. Maxine Gross, interview with author, College Park, Maryland, March 26, 2016.

contract that you couldn't sell it to white people," he remembers his father telling him.⁴⁷

Charles first left the segregated environs of home and his all-black school and church in 1967, at the beginning of fifth grade, when he was desegregated to Glenn Dale Elementary. However, he said he "felt better" within segregation. "At church, I always got picked to do stuff. I was always picked to be in a play. I was in Bible study and choir. And the same thing at Lincoln. So, I felt, comfortable. I felt people valued me."⁴⁸

His first white teacher at Glenn Dale was "real tough" but also constructively challenging: "That was the first class I had where school was really hard," Charles says, adding, "It was better than I thought it would be. They weren't smarter than me," which might suggest his teachers at Lincoln had prepared him well. Charles recalls that while his parents thought desegregated schools were better, they viewed the issue "from a purely equivalency standpoint."⁴⁹ His parents' qualified support reflected blacks' conflicted feelings about desegregation, as they had to weigh the possible gains of "equivalency" of resources against the probable obstacles and possible dangers black children would encounter. While fighting for civil rights and balanced representation had long been an endeavor of black America, and although many endorsed the integrationist vision of Thurgood Marshall and interpreted compulsory

47. Charles James, interview with author, Lanham, Maryland, February 25, 2016.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

desegregation as a social good, their support for compulsory desegregation was not inevitable nor without ambivalence.

Residing in communities that had "flourished despite the limitations of a less than hospitable society,"⁵⁰ and valuing those communities as they did, many black residents of Prince George's County, finding *Brown* to be "a dubious victory,"⁵¹ met school desegregation with as much trepidation as optimism. They forthrightly advocated for fair and rational desegregation planning even in the two decades before the strongly contested federal court order that activated full-scale desegregation in January 1973. When the court order directed the transfer of about 32,823 of the district's 162,000 students, including 12,000 first-time bus riders,^{52,53} children who lived on adjacent blocks, whose backyards ran together, and who played and rode bikes together, were suddenly dispersed to different schools throughout the expansive county. Neighborhoods and towns such as Glenarden, which "had traditions" and were "nurturing,"⁵⁴ provided stability and continuity when children found the changes rendered by court-ordered racial quotas and new attendance boundaries to be confounding and sometimes disappointing. Conrad Briggs recalls dreading the

50. Lakeland Community Heritage Project, *Lakeland: African Americans in College Park* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 8.

51. Briggs.

52. "Judge: Segregated System Was Never ... Dismantled," *Washington Post*, December 30, 1972.

53. Charles R. Krause, "County Classes to Reopen," *Washington Post*, January 29, 1973.

54. Briggs.

midyear, court-ordered transfer in January 1973, which reassigned him and his ninth-grade classmates at Thomas Johnson Junior High, black and white, to he says as many as five different schools. As a result of desegregation planning between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, Conrad alone attended five schools – Glenarden Woods and Ardmore elementary schools, Thomas Johnson and Beltsville junior high schools, and DuVal High School.⁵⁵

Barrett Matthews was in the middle of second grade at Glenarden Woods Elementary, his neighborhood school, when he was desegregated ten miles away to Whitehall Elementary in Bowie, which was near a large housing development that had only a few years earlier infamously barred black home buyers.⁵⁶ After leaving Glenarden Woods, Barrett did not attend school again with most of his Glenarden neighbors until junior high school. He remembered, though, as did others, that their communities made the dramatic changes, the separation from their homes, schools, teachers, and classmates, the changes in routine, feel less jolting. Living in Glenarden the rest of the time, "you'd still see each other at the [Martin Luther] King site or the rec," Barrett remembered, referring to Glenarden's two community centers. "We also played Boys' Club ball together, and we were still, well, Glenarden."⁵⁷ For Conrad Briggs, forging good friendships across racial lines did not minimize the significance

55. Ibid.

56. "Belair at Bowie Maryland," Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://cdn.loc.gov/master/pnp/habshaer/md/md1700/md1757/data/md1757data.pdf>

57. Barrett Matthews, interview with author, Glenarden, Maryland, March 6, 2016.

of neighborhood identity: "By the time you got out of DuVal," Conrad said, you still were a product of your community. Glenarden proud!"⁵⁸

When Sandra White Minor voluntarily enrolled in Bladensburg High in 1968, where she recalled being one of 150 black students out of 2,500, she returned every evening to her all-black Glenarden neighborhood, where, she said, "we did the things you used to see on TV. You had the mayor and you had parades and you had the Boy Scouts. ... It was a wonderful place to grow up."⁵⁹

The residents of all-black North Brentwood recognized the importance of having a gathering place for the town's children after desegregation planning closed North Brentwood Elementary school in 1970. The old school's conversion into a community center allowed the residents to have a year-round center with "teen club and different activities," including "a great Head Start program," North Brentwood native Maxine Jennings Gray recalled. It was "a big plus" for the town.⁶⁰ Her younger brother, Fred Jennings, who made his career in the county's parks and recreation department, thinks closing the elementary school was an attempt by the county to annex North Brentwood. "If you have a public school in your neighborhood, you have more civic organizations meeting. ... It's just a sense of community when you can go to this place, and y'all can sit down and discuss matters. It's like a hub. ... They

58. Briggs.

59. Sandra White Minor, interview with author, Bowie, Maryland, March, 24, 2016.

60. Maxine Jennings Gray, interview with author, North Brentwood, Maryland, March 3, 2016.

wanted us to merge into their culture and lose our identity, and I don't think people in North Brentwood were going to lose their identity to the county."⁶¹

Black families did desire to maintain connections to other black families, as Gregg argued, thus, it is reasonable to explore how they thought the campaign to desegregate the nation's schools would affect their communities, their lives, and to a greater extent, their children's lives.

Between 1950 and 1970, Prince George's County's population more than tripled to just under 661,000, and its black population quadrupled to almost 92,000.⁶² Residentially segregated as a result of social custom, discriminatory real estate practices, and preference, whites and blacks in Prince George's were more demographically similar than they might have readily appeared to be. Throughout the 1960s, they "grew similar in urbanization, youthfulness, income, upward mobility, marital status, and home ownership." By 1969, although black Prince Georgians' median household income was almost twenty percent less than whites' household income – \$10,622 compared with \$12,747⁶³ – half of blacks and whites in the county

61. Fred Jennings, interview with author, North Brentwood, Maryland, March 3, 2016.

62. Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, "The Many Faces of Prince George's County," 7.

63. U.S. Commission, on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light: School Desegregation in Prince George's County* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), 47.

owned the homes in which they lived; and black homeowners under thirty years of age purchased homes in the same value range as white homeowners.⁶⁴

From the mid-1960s through the 1970s, Prince George's County transformed from rural in character and function to solidly suburban. Middle-income black families from Washington, D.C., moved into the county's older black neighborhoods, as well as its newer housing developments that were being sold exclusively to black families. Younger, working-class, and lower-income-earners in Washington, D.C.'s southeastern and northeastern quadrants were drawn to the affordable garden-style apartment complexes in the county's central region, a significant portion of which bordered those areas of the city.

Living between two major cities, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., blacks in Prince George's were neither isolated nor insulated from events taking place in the nation. They read the cities' major white newspapers and the publications of the black press. The influential *Afro-American* was founded in Baltimore, birthplace of Thurgood Marshall, and it published bi-weekly editions there and in Washington, D.C. It had been in publication for more than sixty years at the time of the *Brown* decision. Through the paper's reporting and advocacy in black communities, readers were not only informed of the news, but were encouraged to get behind black

64. Ibid, 51.

progressive causes. The paper had, for instance, rallied its readers to support Donald Murray's desegregation of the University of Maryland's law school in 1936.⁶⁵

By the fall of 1969, several high schools in Prince George's County had experienced racial violence, and Bladensburg High – with an estimated 300 to 500 blacks among its 2,400 students – quite noticeably. For two consecutive years it had been the scene of fighting between whites and blacks. Yet, white parents in the town of Cheverly, whose children attended Bladensburg High, were less concerned about the violence there than they were about their children's scheduled desegregation of the all-black Fairmont Heights High the next year, where they thought they would encounter "a kind of racial and social antagonism" and "a climate of resentment."⁶⁶

Meanwhile, a news reporter visiting Fairmont Heights High found that "time and time again in interviews, parents expressed as their overriding concern the possibility that desegregation might bring racial violence. The price of desegregation, they fear, could be disorder in class rooms and halls, intervention by white police as at Bladensburg,"⁶⁷ wrote David Hardy of the *Washington Post*.

Black parents' fears of violence were stoked not only by national tragedies and school violence, but also by the county police force's reputation for brutality and harassment against blacks throughout the region. The county swore in its first two

65. PBS, "The Afro-American," *The Black Press: Soldiers without Swords*, http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/afroamerican.html (accessed January 19, 2017).

66. Lawrence Meyer, "In All-White Cheverly: Apprehension, Protest," *Washington Post*, November 30, 1969.

67. David W. Hardy, "Black Fairmont Heights: Fears, Cautious Optimism," *Washington Post*, November 30, 1969.

black officers in February 1968.⁶⁸ However, the police department's notoriety for assaults on blacks prompted the Maryland Human Relations Council in the summer of 1970, at the request of a group called Concerned Black Citizens of Prince George's County, to ask county commissioners to "study possible changes in the county police force's relations with minorities."⁶⁹ The same group had led a protest rally at the county courthouse the previous fall to push for further investigation into the death of a Fairmount Heights man killed by police, and also to ask for the establishment of a citizens review board.⁷⁰

Police relations with black county residents were so uneasy that when the town of Glenarden was trying in the mid-1960s to annex a new housing development into which black families were moving, town officials used as a selling point the fact that Glenarden had its own municipal police unit. Their reasoning, Conrad Briggs explains, was, "You call the police, your first encounter is going to be with somebody who lives in your town, somebody's who's accountable to you, not to the county."⁷¹

The county police were not alone in stoking fear within black communities, which were conspicuous targets for white supremacist groups that operated in the

68. *Washington Post*, "Prince George's Police Swear in Two Negroes," February 21, 1968.

69. Herbert Denton, "Prince George's Plans Police Relations Study," *Washington Post*, August 5, 1970.

70. Peter Osnos, "Blacks Protest in Prince George's," *Washington Post*, October 4, 1969.

71. Briggs, interview.

county, neighboring Montgomery County, throughout the state, and just across the city line in northern Virginia. In 1967, between March and July, the town of Laurel, Maryland, which sits in Prince George's and Howard counties, saw Ku Klux Klan cross burnings at a black cemetery and a black church, and the attempted bombing of a black family's home.⁷² One white separatist directly targeted children for intimidation. After the 1968 closing of their community school, North Brentwood Elementary, black children had to walk about a mile to Brentwood Elementary in the adjacent white community. They faced not only the danger of crossing high-traffic intersections, Maxine Jennings Gray remembers, but also intimidation by "a crazy man." On December 24, 1970, the *Washington Post* reported that "a man on several occasions handed out 'go back to Africa' literature to black children" on their way to school. The *Post* identified him as a resident of Brentwood who claimed to be the national spokesperson for the Minuteman, a white supremacist group.⁷³

Maxine, whose son was one of the walkers, remembers worrying about the safety of his new commute. "I was one who always felt somebody should be meeting them ... just the fact of dealing with traffic. They had some crossing guards, but there

72. Peter A. Jay, "4 Linked to Klan Chief in Laurel Arson Attempt," *Washington Post*, July 18, 1967; Michael Drosnin, "Laurel Residents Blame Outsiders for Racial Woes," *Washington Post*, July 13, 1967; "Nightly Blockade of Negro Section in Laurel Is Ordered Discontinued," *Washington Post*, July 21, 1967; "Laurel Mayor Makes Appeal for Race Amity," *Washington Post*, July 24, 1967.

73. Jim Mann, "Avowed Minuteman Spokesman Runs Town's All-White Teen Club," *Washington Post*, December 24, 1970.

were still places where there weren't crossing guards. We tried at one time to get busing, but they said that we were too close. It wasn't a long enough distance."⁷⁴

Desegregation's promise of educational opportunity required compromises and sacrifices that threatened black communities' control over their own spaces, homes, and families, inducing frustration that was no less valid and justified than the frustration felt by white parents over busing.

74. Jennings Gray.

Chapter 3: No Troubles

While many black Americans reacted to the Brown vs. Board of Education decision with reserved optimism, some lamented the decision, and others viewed it as the decisive strategic advantage needed to challenge segregation in their local school districts. One year after Brown, the Supreme Court directed school boards to move with deliberate intent toward desegregating their districts, but simultaneously allowed them to set their own timetables for achieving desegregation. Prince George's County Schools Superintendent William S. Schmidt was a native of Frederick, Maryland, about eighty miles north and west of Upper Marlboro, the Prince George's County seat and location of school district headquarters. A veteran educator, Schmidt took advantage of the Supreme Court's vagueness by ignoring the directive. He announced his intent to sustain segregated operations in every area of the Prince George's County schools.

Black parents in Prince George's responded warily, evidence of their ambivalence and trepidation toward desegregating schools. Anticipating better educational resources and opportunities than those at their own schools, a few blacks applied for their children to be transferred to all-white schools under a new freedom-of-choice policy the school board initiated. Local NAACP leaders encouraged more black parents to do the same, while also pressuring the school board for further desegregation. Most black parents did not apply for freedom-of-choice transfers, however, as a program of new-school construction in black communities provided some with justification for keeping their children within their own neighborhoods,

where parents could assume their safety and well being under black teachers and within black neighborhoods. Further, when their children attended black schools, parents were more assured that their children were safe, had a sense of belonging, and were instructed and nurtured within the cultural and social conventions of the black community.

On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court, ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, pronounced that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place.” Thurgood Marshall, the lead defense attorney for the NAACP, had driven home the winning argument in the case, convincing all nine justices that maintaining and operating separate public-funded school systems for black children and white children denied black children the assurance of equality the United States Constitution guaranteed its citizens. The *Brown* decision created unprecedented possibilities for young black and white Americans to share physical and social space, and transcend seemingly immutable racial barriers, as they never had before.

The *Baltimore Afro-American*, one of Thurgood Marshall's hometown newspapers, reported that Marshall called the decision "the greatest victory we have ever had." Vivian Carter Mason, president of the National Council of Negro Women, said the decision "gives credence to the fact that we are determined to reconcile democratic practices with democratic principles."

The *Afro* also reported that some observers were more circumspect. At Maryland's Morgan State College, its former president Dwight O. Williams said, "I am very much pleased and I must confess ... a little bit surprised." Seeing the

court's decision in the context of international relations, Williams added, "The highest court in our land couldn't afford to state to other nations of the world that this is a jim-crow country legally."⁷⁵

Many black Americans did not take such a wide-angle view of *Brown*. The difference it could make to them would be observed where it mattered most, in their local communities. A school girl's angst, as reported in the *Afro*, put the decision in a different perspective: "A little north in Virginia, Barbara Trent, 16, one of the 400 colored pupils of the Robert R. Moton High school in Farmville, broke down in tears when her teacher told her of the decision: 'Our teacher told us it may cost her job. ... We went on studying history, but things weren't the same, and will never be the same.'⁷⁶

During the 1953-54 school year, the Prince George's County, Maryland, school district was administered by William S. Schmidt, who oversaw an enrollment of 37,300 white students and 5,300 black students. He administered a seven-member, governor-appointed board of education. Of the district's 104 schools, twenty-four were for the black students only, and the remaining for white students only. Schmidt, a native of Frederick, Maryland, about ninety miles northwest of the school board offices in Upper Marlboro, had been superintendent of the county schools since 1951. Announcing in 1955 the board's intent to initiate a voluntary desegregation policy –

75. "What the Leaders Say about Court Decision," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 29, 1954.

76. *Ibid.*

which let students apply for enrollment to the school of their choice – Schmidt, freely interpreting the Supreme Court's directive to the states, boasted that the plan "put full responsibility for desegregation on the parents of the child with the School Board reserving the right to determine whether or not each individual case is administratively feasible."⁷⁷

Prince George's County schools segregated not only students, but also faculty and staff. Schools for black children employed only black teachers, black principals, black custodians, and black secretaries. Their supervisors, who were black, worked in segregated office space at school headquarters. The same distinctions applied to schools for white children and to white employees. Furthermore, to sustain its dual, overlapping, racially coded attendance zones, black and white children rode separate school buses that traveled the same routes to different schools. The school to which a student was assigned depended upon, first, what race the student was, and second, where the closest school was for students of his race.

Black students and employees in 1954 were under the administrative leadership of Doswell E. Brooks, who had been Supervisor of Colored Education since 1922. In December 1956, Gov. Theodore McKeldin relieved Brooks of his supervisory responsibilities in order to appoint him to the county school board, following the death of William J. Griffith, a bondsman from Croome Station who in May 1953 had become the first black member of the county board. Both Griffith and Brooks were Republicans, as were the governor and the superintendent of schools.⁷⁸

77. "County to Act on Plan for Pupil Shifts," *Washington Post*, August 5, 1955.

78. "William J. Griffith," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, Oct 23, 1956.

County voters would not begin electing their school board representatives for another twenty years.

Among black educators, Brooks was viewed similarly to his predecessor, James H. Armstrong: as an agent of the white leadership. In the 1970s, a retired elementary school principal said Brooks had "stood in the way of the educational advancement of Black people" and had not been "held in high esteem by the Black community."⁷⁹

Another view of Brooks emerges from a report that historian Carter G. Woodson gave at the 1948 convention of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Praising the conventioners for their efforts in "acquainting the members of both races with the record of the Negro," Woodson commended Brooks specifically, announcing that "Assistant Superintendent of Schools Elmer A. Henderson of Baltimore and Supervisor Doswell E. Brooks of Prince George's County are likewise giving both material and moral assistance while carrying to the members of the white race the proposal that they, too, should become part of the movement."⁸⁰

Brooks' demeanor at a January 1957 county school board meeting, the first he attended as a member of the body, reveals that he managed his standing with

79. Alvin Thornton and Karen Gooden, *Like a Phoenix I'll Rise: An Illustrated History of African Americans in Prince George's County, Maryland, 1696-1996*, Virginia Beach, VA: Donning, 1997, 144.

80. Woodson, C. G. "The Annual Report of the Director," *Journal of Negro History* 33, no. 4 (1948): 387-94, accessed February 22, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/stable/2715917>.

necessary diplomacy and unfounded optimism. Brooks told reporters who asked about desegregation, "We have not had any troubles or difficulties yet and I don't envision any for the future because the program we have in motion here appears to mean the accomplishment of this objective – integration."⁸¹

Prince George's County Superintendent Schmidt was just as vague on the subject, but far less tactful. On May 18, 1954, the day after the *Brown* decision, he joined school district leaders from the Washington, D.C., suburbs at a conference to "take a close look at their integration problems." Speaking with the press who covered the meeting, Schmidt signaled the do-nothing approach to which he would adhere. Blacks living in "predominantly Negro areas" with new schools might not be eager to integrate, Schmidt told reporters. "Integration would not be forced on Negroes," he said, adding that he could foresee no serious problems "if we sit down and try to work out the solution together."⁸² Schmidt's perception of blacks' possible reticence toward integration was accurate, but his motive for suggesting a voluntary desegregation plan in Prince George's County was based wholly in his segregationist beliefs.

Schmidt went on to chair a committee of Maryland's public school chiefs that deliberated, among other topics, the negative effects of segregation on black children and the "emotional disturbance it [was] creating in white children by revoking the

81. "Retired Educator Named to County School Board," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 5, 1956.

82. "Area Officials Prepare for Integration," *Washington Post*, May 19, 1954.

pre-existing right” they had to attend segregated schools.⁸³ Schmidt's failure to see the seminal meaning and intent of *Brown* and to grasp its compulsory nature until a decade later allowed the Prince George's County public schools to remain in a status of de jure segregation for another eighteen years.

Others in Prince George's, however, clearly understood the social impetus of *Brown* and began discussing the challenges of the legislation, as well as solutions to managing them. The *Washington Post* reported on March 27, 1955, that two large Washington-area PTA groups, in Prince George's County and Washington, D.C., were moving ahead to "hold workout sessions on better human relations, with emphasis on problems of school integration." The Prince George's PTA scheduled a daylong "institute on integration" for Saturday, April 2 at Fairmount Heights Elementary School, with the keynote address to be given by Furman L. Templeton, executive director of the Baltimore Urban League, and a panel discussion to include white county school board member Louise Yuill.⁸⁴ Yet, as it had no plans to desegregate the school district, the school board as a whole gave no thought to possible changes in the county's racial dynamics.

A year and two weeks after the *Brown* decision, on May 31, 1955, the Supreme Court provided states with a broad guideline for breaking down their dual school systems and racially integrating their schools. The high court directed them to

83. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 79.

84. "P-TA Groups to Discuss Integration," *Washington Post*, March 27, 1955.

“make a prompt and reasonable start toward full compliance” with *Brown*, a directive so broad an Associated Press reporter called it a decision that was “likely to keep the lawyers arguing for a long, long time.”⁸⁵

Segregationist policy makers, including those in Prince George's, read the lack of specificity in the decision, which came to known as *Brown II*, as a signal to simply ignore *Brown*.⁸⁶

The Prince George's County school board had six weeks earlier appointed twenty-two county residents to serve as the Fact-Finding Committee to Study Problems of Desegregation. The committee's task was to speak with the communities and then recommend a desegregation plan for county schools. Five members of the committee were black, including Doswell Brooks, who at the time was still serving as superintendent, and Chesley Mack, a College Park councilman who lived in the Lakeland community.

The members of the board and the committee made a resolution “not to appear before citizens groups or other interested persons” to discuss “how desegregation in Prince George's County will be designed.”⁸⁷ They were given until July 15 to devise a plan. On August 9, seven members of the county branch of the NAACP, including the branch founder and president Hester King, attended the school board meeting to hear Superintendent Schmidt announce the committee's recommendations and the board's

85. “‘Prompt, Reasonable Start’ Toward Racial Desegregation Directed,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 1, 1955.

86. *Ibid.*

87. “Minutes – Prince George's County Board of Education” (April 12, 1955), Box 6, Folder 7, Ruth S. Wolf, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

plans for enacting desegregation in the schools. Taking literally its fact-gathering mission, the committee collected data that revealed the capacity of all county classrooms to absorb enrollment changes, identified schools that could absorb new students, and surveyed the community to ascertain attitudes toward school desegregation and a need for community education. Its projections revealed that limited classroom capacity would keep the district from thoroughly integrating in the fall.

However, sharing with the board its evidentiary findings, the committee also identified "some schools where school desegregation can be put into effect immediately." They advised the board that "the present policy of fixed school boundaries can be continued but on an integrated basis"⁸⁸ and that "a program of desegregation should be started as soon as practicable in each school where classroom facilities and other conditions permit."⁸⁹ As a matter of policy, they suggested "pupils, irrespective of race, should be allowed to attend the school closest to their homes with present exceptions." The committee clarified an exceptional situation to be one in which a student was enrolled in a special program not offered at the school nearest her home, or in which a twelfth-grade student requested to graduate from the high school in which she already was enrolled.⁹⁰

88. Ibid.

89. "County to Air Desegregation Plans Aug. 9," *Washington Post*, July 27, 1955.

90. Fact-Finding Committee to Study Problems of Desegregation in Prince George's County, "Report of the Fact-Finding Committee to Study Problems of Desegregation in Prince George's County," (1955), Maryland Room, Hornbake Library Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

Schmidt released the report to the press, but he took out the charts that showed what enrollment figures would be if all Negro students in the county were assigned to white schools, saying that the committee had not taken into consideration that Negro schools "would continue to operate and continue to draw students."⁹¹ Schmidt's exclusion of the data likely revealed his intention to build more schools within black communities and to retain race-coded attendance zones. That the committee did not project enrollment figures for integrated black schools underscores the general perception of desegregation as a one-way process that required action on the part of black children only. This perception, itself, is explained by education scholar Robert A. Garda, following Derrick Bell's interest-convergence theory. Bell argued that whites' support of desegregation was contingent upon it providing a benefit for their children. Garda further suggests that "the benevolent, moral, third-party and societal justifications for integrating schools simply have not persuaded white parents to create diverse schools because, as shown by the interest-convergence theory, parents act only out of self-interest." This rationale could be applied to white parents and policy makers in Prince George's, who also were motivated by history, convention, and civic and social privilege.

The Fact-Finding Committee also reported on its informal surveys of white and black citizens throughout the county to ascertain their feelings about desegregation in schools. The surveys revealed that white county residents preferred "gradual" change and "almost all" black residents "wanted desegregation to go into effect immediately." Black and white interviewees frequently asked the committee

91. "County to Air Integration Plans Aug. 9," *Washington Post*.

the same questions, including: How will the parents of the two groups get along together? Will desegregation include social and after-school activities? Can children's activities outside of schools be desegregated before schools are desegregated? What effect will desegregation have on the health of white and Negro children?⁹²

Although voting at its August 9, 1955, meeting to accept the committee's findings, the superintendent and board ignored the recommendations of the fact-finding committee and announced a tokenistic, voluntary desegregation plan under which any student could attend the school of their choice, allowing for available space and the board's right to "delay or deny" the request "if it deem[ed] such action wise and necessary."⁹³ Superintendent Schmidt said the school district had "no intention of compelling a student to attend a specific school or deny him the privilege of transferring to another."⁹⁴

After the announcement, Hester King told the press the local NAACP would take a "wait-and-see" approach to the new policy. "We're not pleased with the fact that Supt. William S. Schmidt hasn't set a timetable on his plan, but if he doesn't go far enough soon enough, we'll just have to go ahead and get it done the right way," King said.⁹⁵

92. Ibid.

93. Mike Monroney, "Prince George's Schools Take Integration Step," *Washington Post*, August 10, 1955.

94. Ibid.

95. "Board Stands Firm," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 20, 1955.

The Thomas family in the all-black town of North Brentwood was among the first to apply for a transfer under the new policy. They requested their son Willie's transfer to Northwestern High, an all-white school that was closer to his North Brentwood home than was Fairmont Heights High, the all-black school his siblings and neighbors attended. Willie was among ninety-three black students who applied for freedom-of-choice transfers that first year and among the sixty-seven who were approved to integrate the county school system in September of the same year.⁹⁶ The school board received no transfer requests from white students. At the time, total enrollment in county schools was 49,977, and 6,347 black children were enrolled in the twenty-one all-black schools.⁹⁷

The small number of freedom-of-choice applicants did not prove that black parents opposed the principle of desegregation as much as it reflected blacks' anxieties and apprehension over sending their children into communities where blacks had not previously been welcomed, nor into schools about which they had little knowledge and where they had neither control nor influence. Even as *Brown v. Board of Education* was being celebrated as a civil rights triumph, it also intensified suburban whites' prejudices and the insidious threats white supremacists posed to black Americans. During interviews with the United States Commission on Civil Rights in 1976, black parents whose children had been enrolled in Prince George's

96. Roger B. Farquhar, "Segregation 'Quietly' Quitting" Maryland: Integration Orderly in 1955," *Washington Post*, January 1, 1956; U.S. Civil Rights Commission, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 98.

97. U.S. Civil Rights Commission, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 98.

County schools when the free-choice policy was in effect commented on "a general atmosphere of fear"⁹⁸ surrounding desegregation. Others expressed concerns that their children "might be the only black child in a school or that their child might be abused, scorned, or maybe just tolerated."⁹⁹

Indeed, it was the year *after* the 1954 desegregation ruling when white vigilantes tortured and murdered fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, a black Chicago resident who was visiting family in Mississippi. Two years after Till was murdered, white resisters to school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, attempted to mob-attack nine black students who had been selected to integrate the city's Central High School.

Thurgood Marshall and black psychologist Kenneth Clark had convinced the Supreme Court that black children were psychologically harmed by attending segregated schools. Yet, blacks were emotionally tied to the schools for which they had lobbied, and helped finance and build. The establishment of schools for black children during Reconstruction was as much a part of the overcoming theme as political representation and the freedom to openly worship. The sense of ownership of their schools grew from the experience of claiming their citizenship and exercising their freedoms. The freedom to choose also meant having the autonomy to protect their children and decide what was in their best interest, which for many families meant keeping them in the school located within their own community, with black

98. Ibid, 153.

99. Ibid, 152.

teachers who "'had a way' with black students ... deeply understood them and were willing to do what was necessary to help the students achieve and to succeed."¹⁰⁰

Moreover, black parents grasped the arbitrary nature of the freedom-of-choice approval process, which granted the board the right to delay or deny a transfer request when it found doing so to be "wise and necessary."¹⁰¹ Black families also objected to the inadequate effort to publicize the choice plan to white communities, the short application period for transfer requests, and the requirement that parents provide transportation."¹⁰² Racial consciousness, however, did not necessarily conflict with support for desegregation. A black school district official interviewed in the 1970s by the government's civil rights commission said whites did not think black communities and black schools "contained anything of value. They were mistaken, of course, but not wrong," he said. "They were victims of the blindness caused by racial separation."¹⁰³

For freedom-of-choice applicant Willie Thomas of North Brentwood, desegregating Northwestern High in the fall of 1955 had been "an opportunity ... to make a better life for my family," he said in 2004, the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown* decision. Still residing in Prince George's County, Thomas recalled being "continuously harassed" by a white male student and also being a loner until he met a

100. Milner and Howard, 285.

101. Monroney.

102. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 150.

103. Ibid.

group of "nerds who liked mathematics and science, like me, he said." After graduating from Northwestern, Thomas attended the University of Maryland in College Park, close to his home and his high school. There, he was the only black student majoring in chemical engineering.¹⁰⁴

His conflict-free years at Northwestern High did not carry over to the black students who followed him. In the 1970s, increased rates of desegregation in county schools, required by federal intervention, intensified racial tensions and the feelings of isolation for some blacks integrating white schools. Leon Jennings, the younger brother of Maxine Jennings Gray and Fred Jennings, was involuntarily desegregated from Fairmont Heights High to Northwestern High in the 1966-67 school year. Describing Leon as both smart and athletic, Fred said he thought being at Northwestern would expose his brother to athletic recruiters from white colleges that were larger and could offer more opportunities than the historically black colleges most athletes at Fairmont Heights would attend. Leon never took to Northwestern though. Maxine chuckles remembering her brother confiding in her: "He told me, 'I did everything wrong at that school that I could so they'd put me out and send me back to Heights.'"¹⁰⁵

As president of the Prince George's County NAACP, Hester King helped keep the desegregation of county schools in the foreground of local politics. She established the county chapter in 1935 and was known throughout the region for her

104. Hamil Harris, "Trailblazer Shuns Label of 'Hero,'" *Washington Post*, May 13, 2004.

105. Jennings; Jennings Gray.

efforts to combat racial discrimination in schools and other public spaces. In regular attendance at school board meetings, she was level headed in the face of Superintendent Schmidt's patronizing opposition to desegregation. In news stories covering school board meetings, she was often identified as the leader of the delegation pushing for progress on desegregation. King agitated the board for a policy and a broad plan that would ensure desegregation of schools.

At a statewide NAACP meeting in 1956, the legal redress committee reported that it had "agreed to press for action in Maryland counties still practicing school segregation" and had "also agreed to ask the Federal Bureau of Investigation to probe the cross-burning episode on the lawn of Mrs. Hester King, president of the Prince George's County Branch recently."¹⁰⁶

On May 14, 1957, around the same time a judge in Little Rock, Arkansas, was refusing further delay of his school desegregation order, King again led the Prince George's NAACP in lobbying the school board to abandon its freedom-of-choice policy, arguing that the policy had rendered "too little integration." Of the 6,785 black students enrolled in county schools, 153 were attending 17 schools that previously had all-white enrollments. Superintendent Schmidt claimed that the "gradual and orderly" desegregation plan was the reason there had been no racial violence in county schools, and that the county had no plans to send black teachers into all-white

106. "NAACP to Act on Cross Burning," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 4, 1956.

or mixed-race schools, since "the Supreme Court decision applied only to students, and no mention was made of teachers."¹⁰⁷

While Schmidt handed Hester King excuses, policy makers in Montgomery County, Maryland, one of Prince George's adjacent school districts, were accomplishing desegregation more directly, having abandoned its free-choice policy after two years. Slowly but not without animosity and tension, the Montgomery school board moved forward, realizing they "should do what was best for the education of children, not what would be least disturbing or most comfortable for the community," former Montgomery County school board member Rose Kramer said in a 1961 interview.¹⁰⁸

By the 1960-61 school year, 72.9 percent of Montgomery County's 3,230 black students had been integrated into formerly all-white schools. During the same school year, only six percent of Prince George's County's 7,800 black students were in desegregated schools. The county's black leadership expressed disappointment in the small numbers of black parents who had applied for transfers through the freedom-of-choice policy, but they also acknowledged black families' "satisfaction with the new Negro schools." Fourteen had been built since 1951 to accommodate the area's post-war population boom and address overcrowding that led to several black and white elementary schools holding daily classes in two shifts. Black parents, conflicted over the slow pace of desegregation and the need for better facilities and

107. "County Keeps Gradual Pace in Integration," *Washington Post*, May 15, 1957.

108. Carole Bowie, "Two Nearby Counties Differ on Desegregation," *Washington Post*, March 17, 1961.

resources welcomed new schools for black children. A black county resident looking back at the 1960s during a 1976 interview with the federal civil rights commission, said black parents had seen "how hard it was to get into white schools and decided it would be better to have their children go to a new black school close to home than travel halfway across the county to an old black school."¹⁰⁹ Yet, there also was skepticism surrounding new-school construction. Another black parent told commission interviewers they thought "new black schools and classroom additions were deliberately constructed at the direction of the administration to 'contain' the black student population."¹¹⁰

In the spring of 1961, Hester King had grown tired of what she viewed as the school board's token gestures and accommodationist policies. "I really can't approve of the school board's leaving this whole problem in the hands of parents," she told a reporter.¹¹¹ Later that year, King resigned her position as head of the Prince George's County NAACP but remained active in desegregation efforts. On the morning of February 26, 1962, her husband of fifty years shot and killed her after two days of arguing about her work with the NAACP, he claimed. The bewildering circumstances of her death notwithstanding, King's "wise counsel"¹¹² continued to inspire younger civil rights workers in the county, including her predecessor the Rev. Perry Smith,

109. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 148.

110. *Ibid.*

111. Carole Bowie, "Two Nearby Counties Differ on Desegregation."

112. "Husband of NAACP Leader Held for Jury," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 10, 1962.

and her son Arthur King, who in 1966 ran for a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates and became Prince George's County's first black representative in the state legislature.¹¹³ In March 1973, Arthur's bullish support for school desegregation influenced State Senator Steny H. Hoyer and other state legislators to hold the line against a conservative, anti-busing contingency attempting to gain control of the county school board, although the legislators' efforts failed.¹¹⁴

113. "Celebrating the Journey: The 125th Anniversary of UMES, 1886-2011," University of Maryland Eastern Shore, accessed April 20, 2017, <https://www.umes.edu/125/Content.aspx?id=38004>.

114. Richard M. Cohen, "Pr. George's Senators to Change School Bill," *Washington Post*, March 30, 1973; Charles A. Krause, "Pr. George's Conservative Slate Wins," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1973.

Chapter 4: Petitioning

When in 1961 black parents began to question the school board's policies and intentions regarding desegregating county schools, the board responded with nonchalance. One black family's legal challenge to the school board's freedom-of-choice policy revealed how deep socio-cultural roots and community ties provoked conflicting attitudes among black parents trying to secure educational equality for their children. These attitudes nonetheless eventually coalesced into a large-scale group effort to demand from the school board a more comprehensive desegregation policy that would recognize the value of black schools, equalize disruptions for black and white communities, and ensure a high-quality education to all.

In the early 1960s black parents addressing the county school board regarding desegregation often were met with indifference and board members' ignorance of school policies. A 1976 federal Civil Rights Commission report on school desegregation in Prince George's County documented the foresight of Lakeland parents who in July 1961 questioned the rationale of a plan to transfer their children from the segregated and aging Lakeland Junior High to yet another segregated school – the brand new, soon-to-open Mary McLeod Bethune Junior High, which was five miles away. According to the commission report, Lakeland residents recognized the plan "as another action calculated to confine the largest possible number of black students to all-black schools."¹¹⁵

115. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 111.

At the school board meeting on August 8, 1961, L.L. Wilson of the Carsondale Civic Association, a black community between Glenarden and Lanham, and Enoch Sandidge of Lakeland attended the school board meeting to ask why some parents whose children were granted transfers had to transport them to school while school bus transportation was provided for other transferred children. A reporter covering the meeting noted that no one answered the parents' question. Only after the meeting, the paper noted, did Schmidt tell a reporter buses were not provided for black or white students who transferred out of their attendance areas. Wilson asked the board why principals were required to sign students' transfer requests and if children enrolling in county schools after the freedom-of-choice transfer deadline would be assigned to a school "on the basis of race." Board chairman W. Carroll Beatty told Wilson he would have to wait for an answer while the board studied the issues.¹¹⁶ Board members' casual and dismissive attitudes did not go unnoticed. Later in the decade, as county residents began pushing for an elected school board, a reporter observed that "the combination of a highly able Superintendent and a comparatively passive Board has resulted in critics accusing the Board of being a rubber-stamp outfit."¹¹⁷

During the same meeting in August 1961, Lakeland resident Dervey Lomax, a College Park councilman representing the Lakeland community, pressed the school

116. Victoria Stone, "Prince George's Board Hit on School Transfer," *Washington Post*, August 9, 1961.

117. "Prince George's: Challenge to School Board: Citizens Ask Bigger Role," *Washington Post*, March 24, 1969.

board to reconsider his freedom-of-choice transfer application for his son, which the board had denied the previous summer. During the 1959-60 school year, the Lomax child had attended kindergarten at an integrated, privately run cooperative that operated out of the county's Beltsville Elementary School.¹¹⁸ After kindergarten, his parents used the freedom-of-choice policy to apply for his enrollment into first grade at Beltsville Elementary, a county public school less than five miles north of Lakeland. The school board denied the application, noting that the Lomax family lived within sight of its nearest county public school, Lakeland Elementary. After hiring a private tutor to instruct the child in his first-grade year, 1960-61, the family, still desiring the child's enrollment in an integrated school, applied in the summer of 1961 for a freedom-of-choice transfer to Seat Pleasant Elementary, nearly ten miles from Lakeland. The school board denied the request. Superintendent Schmidt said he had received about one hundred freedom-of-choice applications over the summer and denied only the Lomax request because the family home and the local school were so close "you could throw a baseball from his yard to the school."¹¹⁹

In a confusing defense of the Lomax decision, school board chairman Paul Nussbaum said the denial was based "on the grounds that the family requested the transfer in order to have the child attend an 'integrated' school," and that granting the transfer "would in effect acknowledge the existence of two types of school systems,

118. U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 112.

119. Stone.

namely a segregated system and an integrated system."¹²⁰ Nussbaum's remarks reveal the board's intentional circumventing of the law in perpetuating segregation in county schools. The responses of school officials further reveal the school board's willingness to compromise the fundamental spirit of school desegregation efforts. In his argument, Lomax testified he was aware that county school buses, in order to sustain segregation, were carrying black children great distances from their communities to segregated schools, passing segregated white schools along the way. Lomax also showed photographs of the deteriorating conditions at Lakeland Elementary, calling the school "an eyesore."¹²¹ The Lomax family consistently stated their interest in having their child educated in an integrated environment, yet it is interesting to note that Councilman Lomax used the photographs to justify transferring his son, not to argue for improvements at the Lakeland school on behalf of his elected constituents.

Close-knit and resilient, most Lakeland families did not pursue freedom-of-choice transfers for their children. Benay Gray Hawkins was the same age as the Lomax child and decades later reflected on her perceptions of the community's reaction to those events: "I can't say why the [Lomax] family did it. I can't say why all the families didn't go in and do it. ... I can remember there was talk, and it was more about them thinking they were better than the rest of us, but it wasn't like we stopped

120. Ibid.

121. Stone.

what we were doing," Hawkins says.¹²² Lakeland resident Maxine Gross remembers that at least two other Lakeland families also received freedom-of-choice transfers. Gross, several years younger than the Lomax child and Hawkins, was not yet in school in 1961. While researching Lakeland's history in 2008 for a book project, she spoke with members of the Lomax family, whom she says saw the choice policy as an opportunity: "They thought the facilities and everything were better and that they should be able to get that. And so that's why they fought for his entry into the school." Gross said she asked her father why, when she and her twin sister started school, he had not pursued a freedom-of-choice transfer to a nearby white school. "He said he felt it more important to support Lakeland Elementary School in getting the resources that the kids needed right here in the community," Gross recalled.¹²³ Blacks' common interest in securing their children's well being did not presume they were unified in their perceptions of the benefits of desegregation.

On October 7, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that the Lomax child had integrated College Park Elementary on Monday, October 2, within a mile of his Lakeland neighborhood. The family had been granted a hearing before the state board of education in mid-August. There, NAACP attorney Juanita Mitchell pointed out that white attendance zones and negro attendance zones were marked on school district maps, and she accused the county of "deliberately gerrymandering and

122. Gray Hawkins.

123. Maxine Gross.

redistricting the schools to perpetuate segregation."¹²⁴ Mitchell argued that school district leaders had "the entire eighth grade in Lakeland Junior High transfer to the Fairmount [sic] Heights Junior High School although the children had to pass an all-white junior high school" along the way.¹²⁵

Defending the freedom-of-choice policy, Schmidt testified that 465 out of 8,100 black children were enrolled in formerly white schools.¹²⁶ The hearing became "stormy" and ended with Schmidt consenting to allow the Lomax child to desegregate College Park Elementary. The state board did not rule on the case.¹²⁷

By early 1962, the Lakeland delegation that had addressed the board on the Bethune question the previous summer had joined with blacks from other parts of the county to form Prince George's Citizens Education Committee. On January 9, 1962, after trying for two months to schedule a hearing with the school board, Jesse J. Warr of the North Englewood community led a delegation of black parents to that evening's board meeting, and the Rev. Perry Smith of North Brentwood, who had replaced Hester King as the local NAACP president, also accompanied a group to the meeting.¹²⁸

124. "School Desegregation Case Settled in Prince George's," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 7, 1961.

125. Ibid.

126. Ibid.

127. Carole Bowie, "Prince George's Breaks from Usual School Race Policy," *Washington Post*, September 23, 1961.

128. Carole Bowie, "County Takes No Action on Race Plea," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1962.

On November 24, 1961, Warr had submitted to the members of the board of education a petition he declared to be signed by "more than five hundred citizens of this county."¹²⁹ At the January session, he reminded the school board members that his group had addressed them on the same issue three times in 1961 and had exchanged written correspondence with individual board members over the past six months. He asked the body to clarify its current desegregation policies and to provide specifics of its plan to render more desegregation in the county schools. Warr posed direct questions from several pages of questions he said had been unanswered in the written correspondence. Without waiting for responses from board members, he stated his delegation's views on the subject:

"Are students in the county's public schools assigned to schools on the basis of race?" Warr asked. Speaking for the delegation, he said, "We submit the answer is yes." He then asked, "Is Prince George's County, in fact, maintaining dual school systems?" He replied, "We believe the answer is yes." Warr asked that the community be given, "today, the Board's official answer" to requests made in the petition, and that the board "adopt a plan to bring the school system . . . into full compliance with constitutional requirements by September 1962." Asserting what the petitioners believed to be their lawful claim to education equality, Warr advised the board of the group's intent to appeal to the state board of education and also to take legal action, if

129. "Jesse J. Warr/NAACP, Statement Before the Board of Education" (January 9, 1962), Box 3, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

necessary.¹³⁰ For these parents, the desegregation of schools was a paramount issue in their private and civic lives. Their civic engagement was directly related to their children and their schools. Even in understanding desegregation to be a matter of law, they did not take it for granted but instead lobbied for it, interpreting it as an edict that would not only advantage their children but also advance their race.

Responding to Warr's testimony, the school board noted that since 1955 when the freedom-of-choice policy went into effect, 581 of the 675 applications submitted had been approved. Board chairman Carroll W. Beatty boasted, "The schools of Prince George's County are now in full compliance with the Supreme Court decision of 1954."¹³¹ Warr countered that if a child did not apply for a free-choice transfer, the child would be assigned to a school based on her or his race. Attempting to justify segregation, board member Thomas F. Hicks said forcing children to go to the school nearest their neighborhood was "not the American way," an opinion that ten years later would contradict the rhetoric of anti-busing white parents trying to *keep* their children enrolled in their neighborhood schools.¹³²

However, in 1964, two years after the black parents petitioned the school board, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed federal legislation that established a new American way, one that required school boards throughout the country to draw

130. Ibid.

131. Carole Bowie, "County Takes No Action on Race Plea."

132. Ibid.

attendance zones that would place more black and white children in the same schools and classrooms, and to do so as a condition of receiving federal funding aid.

Chapter 5: Aiming for Quality

When the federal government enacted in 1964 a law requiring the nation's public schools to move decisively toward the full implementation of desegregation or face funding sanctions, civil rights and socially progressive organizations throughout Prince George's County, with black and white members, pressured the board of education to accelerate its desegregation planning. Going further, they challenged them to pursue a principled approach, not one driven by the avoidance of sanctions. Stepping in to provide oversight and technical assistance to the slow-moving board, the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1968 proposed its own plan for desegregating the county's schools. In doing so, the government became seemingly complicit in subjugating the interests of black county residents. In response, blacks made their priorities clear, among them: high-quality education for their children whether in segregated or desegregated schools and quality schools in their own communities.

In the 1963-64 school year, ten years after *Brown*, 1,225 of the county's 10,209 black students were enrolled in schools with white students, by way of freedom-of-choice transfers and residential attendance zones. The remaining 8,984 black children attended the nineteen county schools that had all-black enrollments.¹³³ That number was down from twenty-four all-black schools in 1954. When President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 signed the Civil Rights Act, it outlawed racial

133. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 141.

discrimination by any organization that was receiving federal funding. The legislation also authorized the federal government to withhold federal monies to school districts that had not yet desegregated, forcing Prince George's County to negotiate with the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, one of the federal agencies responsible for enforcing Title VI, for the time needed to develop an acceptable desegregation plan and secure its annual education allotment from the government.

Granting the federal government oversight of the nation's schools would, some believed, bring "a quick and painless end to racial segregation in public schools," historian Hall argues. In reality, Title VI was "foisted on an unwitting public by a 'liberal elite' made up of judges, government officials, and bureaucrats," Hall posits, and in the long run, it only forced black Americans to bear "the onus of their own failure or success."¹³⁴

On the nation's civil rights agenda, the movement to desegregate schools was as galvanizing an issue as were voting, access to public accommodations, and fair housing. At 485 square miles, Prince George's County's pro-desegregation advocates were dispersed enough to ensure that someone in every area of the county throughout the 1960s and 1970s was instigating to bring about the fair and equitable desegregation of county schools. The Prince George's County Action Project, for example, comprised more than forty organizations with diverse purposes. Its members included the Prince George's Fair Housing Coalition, Congress of Racial

134. Hall, 1237.

Equality, Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, churches, interfaith organizations, municipalities, civic associations, and local government offices. The local NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality were expectedly active, but so were the Council of Parent-Teacher Associations and the League of Women Voters, both under the leadership of white New York native Ruth S. Wolf. The League was noticeably out front in petitioning county policy makers to adopt fair housing policies. Wolf's community mindedness led to her appointment to the county school board in 1967, where with black board member Jesse Warr she staunchly challenged the board's anti-desegregation majority.¹³⁵

The U.S. Civil Rights Commission also cited Clergy for Peaceful Desegregation, an interracial and interdenominational group comprising 150 Prince George's County ministers, for putting forth an "unprecedented effort" to "improve race relations" in schools and communities after the 1972 busing decision.¹³⁶

Terrell Wertz was perhaps one of the more daring white advocates for desegregation. The mayor of Cheverly, Wertz went against most of his 7,000 constituents and urged parents to support the school district's desegregation plan. In the December 1969 edition of the town's newsletter, Wertz appealed to his constituents to get behind the planned transfer of Cheverly students to the traditionally black Bethune Junior High School and Fairmont Heights High. Saying it was best to be prepared for the September 1970 change, Wertz told residents, "All of

135. Bart Barnes, "Open Housing Pressed by Suburban Maryland," *Washington Post*, July 4, 1967.

136. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 351.

our efforts as adults should be directed toward creating the proper atmosphere as the thing goes into effect."¹³⁷

On May 9, 1965, the Prince George's County Action Project's Committee on Education sent a report to the school board detailing the board's failure "to exhaust all means to fully implement desegregation of schools." The committee further criticized the freedom-of-choice system, saying it "causes and forces ... both Negroes and whites to accept unequal and separate schools." It advised the board to make a "good faith start" toward implementing a desegregation plan and presented a list of steps to take, among them: "If assigning a student outside of his residential area perpetuates segregation, move the child."¹³⁸ The advice was purposely sarcastic in its simplicity, as white school boards around the country were taking extreme, ridiculous, and wasteful measures to keep white children in all-white schools located in all-white areas.

With the stipulations of Title VI requiring more desegregation than the school system had accomplished in the eleven years since *Brown*, and the receipt of federal education funds contingent upon an acceptable plan, the school board on June 22, 1965, voted on an "accelerated" plan for desegregating county schools.¹³⁹ They set

137. Lawrence Meyer, "Mayor Supports School Plan," *Washington Post*, December 9, 1969.

138. "Prince George's County Community Action Project, Report" (May 9, 1965), Box 3, Folder 2, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

139. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 165.

aside a plan Superintendent Schmidt had proposed on June 8, which activist Michael Tabor of the County Action Project, as well as members of the Congress of Racial Equality, had pointed out would still leave 7,000 of the county's 11,200 black school children in sixteen segregated schools in 1965-66.¹⁴⁰ In the school year that had just ended, 1964-65, eighteen schools had operated with all-black enrollments. Of the 11,284 black students enrolled in the school system, 9,017 had been assigned to all-black schools.¹⁴¹

At that June 22 school board meeting, J. Franklyn Bourne of the county NAACP urged board members to "go beyond legal requirements," be less constrained by convention, and devise a policy driven more by principle than a need to secure federal funding.¹⁴² The central component of the board's plan did go further – although it was not enough – by establishing single attendance zones that would require black and white students to attend the schools closest to their neighborhoods. The plan committed the board to "serve all children in proximity to the school" and to do so "without regard to race."¹⁴³

At a crowded July 28, 1965, school board meeting, a white parent appealed for parents' "prerogative to get out" of an attendance zone "if he feels for any reason he does not like the district he is in." Other white parents were concerned "the abrupt

140. "Negro Units Fight Racial Plan," *Washington Post*, June 13, 1965.

141. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 145.

142. Muriel Guinn, "New Integration Proposal Is Made in Prince George's," *Washington Post*, June 9, 1965.

143. *Ibid.*

change" would "lower educational levels" at their children's schools.¹⁴⁴ When Bourne began reading an NAACP statement endorsing the new plan, white parents walked out of the meeting, while a spokesperson for the County Action Project acknowledged the board's relative progress, thanked board members for the decision, and encouraged them to continue educating the public on the progress of desegregation.¹⁴⁵

That November, a Prince George's County NAACP officer told the members of the county school board that black people viewed their support of desegregation as a moral responsibility,¹⁴⁶ a way to "insure the sum total good life for our citizens, in regards to all areas which includes, health, housing, recreation, as well as education."¹⁴⁷ He testified that the black citizens of the county were calling upon their school district leaders to be "clear-sighted" in helping black students "establish the conditions of [their] own dignity ... and recognize the dignity and value of others."¹⁴⁸ Further, he reminded the school board of its obligation to ensure the general well being of all children, underscoring "that every school in Prince George's County

144. Richard Homan, "Desegregation Plan Angers Parents in Prince George's," *Washington Post*, July 28, 1965.

145. *Ibid.*

146. Gretta Gordy Henry, "A Descriptive Study of the Human Relations Activities and the Process of Desegregation in the Prince George's County, Maryland, Public Schools, 1965-1973, Ph.D. Dissertation, George Washington University, 1974.

147. "NAACP Statement to the Board of Education" (November 19, 1968), Box 7, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

148. *Ibid.*

should have white and black children ... rather than [be] entirely segregated in either direction."¹⁴⁹

Nonetheless, the pattern of willful irresponsibility continued on the part of the superintendent and the school board, as the 1965-66 school year operated with ten schools enrolling only black students, who made up more than half the total black students enrolled in the system. Over the next two school years, 1966-1967 and 1967-68, the only change to this pattern was that black enrollment at four of the schools dropped below one hundred percent, though it remained between ninety and ninety-nine.

With Governor Marvin Mandel's March 1968 appointment of a black citizen, Jesse J. Warr, to the county school board, residents had evidence of some change taking place. Warr was the county NAACP's legislative chairman. He replaced Doswell Brooks, the former Supervisor of Colored Education who had died a month earlier. Like Brooks and Mandel, Warr was a Republican. Civil-rights minded, devoutly religious, and non-militant, the Tennessee native was married and had children enrolled in the county school system. He lived on the same block as Fairmont Heights High School. In a few years, when the 1972 court battle over busing was settled, Warr would be unanimously elected school board chairman.

Upon his appointment, however, he joined a school board whose majority of members were as complacent with the status of desegregation as was the

149. Ibid.

superintendent.¹⁵⁰ One month after Warr's appointment, on April 4, Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated, angering and further propelling blacks nationwide to fight against the withholding of their right to equal educational opportunities. Three months later, the regional Office of Civil Rights for HEW began bearing down on the school board to desegregate five schools that still had all-black enrollments.¹⁵¹ On July 25, 1968, following a three-day, onsite evaluation of the school system to measure its desegregation readiness for the 1968-69 school year, Mr. Mamarella, an HEW official, conducted a tense meeting with Superintendent Schmidt.

The anticipated total black-student enrollment for the upcoming year was 22,285. Although the year would open with only five all-black schools, four other schools still had enrollments that were at least eighty-nine percent black.¹⁵² These nine schools were Fairmont Heights High, Bethune Junior High, and Beaver Heights, Fairmount Heights, Glenarden Woods, Highland Park, Lakeland, North Brentwood, and Oakwood elementary schools.¹⁵³

Exasperated with HEW's negative assessment of the school system's progress on desegregation, Schmidt gave the impression he had understood neither the compulsory nature nor the complexity of the *Brown* mandate.

150. "NAACP Aid Gets School Board Post," *Washington Post*, March 14, 1968.

151. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 216.

152. *Ibid*, 169.

153. *Ibid*, 211.

"This county took on a massive problem of selling the public on geographical boundaries," Schmidt told Mamarella. "People were [t]old that the neighborhood school concept would be the end of the desegregation problems. Now you are saying that is not enough."¹⁵⁴

Mamarella suggested the county close its one remaining all-black high school, Fairmont Heights, and the one all-black junior high school, Mary McLeod Bethune. "This would solve your problem," he told Schmidt.

The superintendent asked, "Is the department saying to us, 'You cannot have any Negro schools,' and that you will apply this same rule to all the major cities for the United States or just Prince George's County?"

Mamarella told Schmidt that the goal of *Brown* was to break down legal segregation in schools in the South.

"What if the people don't want the plan?" Schmidt asked.

"If the people don't want to follow the law of the land, they are wrong," Mamarella replied.¹⁵⁵

Whether Schmidt's concerns were grounded in empathy for his constituents, his own opposition to desegregation, or an aversion to controversy, his exchange with Mamarella signaled the indifference with which he would continue to oversee the county's desegregation process.

154. "Minutes – Meeting with Representatives of HEW" (July 25, 1968), Box 7, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

155. *Ibid.*

Following up on its July promise to provide detailed technical assistance to the county, HEW on August 27, 1968, delivered Schmidt a recommended plan for closing by June 1969 four of the five remaining all-black schools: Fairmont Heights High, Mary McLeod Bethune Junior High, and Lakeland and North Brentwood elementary schools. Glenarden Woods Elementary would remain open and be paired with a nearby white school, Dodge Park Elementary, although there was no road or path that connected the two schools.¹⁵⁶ However, since the July meeting, HEW had added Oakcrest Elementary to the list of recommended closings. This plan also directed the county to ensure three other all-black elementary schools, Beaver Heights, Fairmont Heights Elementary, and Highland Park maintained a fifty percent white enrollment. Further, these schools were to provide remedial instruction in core subjects; increase instruction in music, art, and "other cultural areas"; use "innovative techniques" to "lift the quality of instruction;"¹⁵⁷ and maintain a faculty that was fifty percent black and fifty percent white.¹⁵⁸

After discussing the HEW plan at its October 8 meeting, the school board on October 29 directed Schmidt to disseminate the plan to the press and public, including PTA and civic leaders whose constituents would be affected by the changes. Upon

156. Pairing involved exchanging students in the upper or lower grades at a predominantly white school with students in the upper or lower grades at a nearby, predominantly black school.

157. "Minutes – Prince George's County Board of Education" (October 29, 1968), Box 7, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

158. Peter Osnos, "Prince George's to Integrate 8 Schools," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1968.

learning of the proposal, black parent Sylvester Vaughns said HEW and the county school board were pulling a "hoax on the black community by having us believe for the last 14 years that we were moving toward full equality."¹⁵⁹

The board's next step was to invite the community at large to a public meeting "for the purpose of hearing citizen comments or ideas on how desegregation might be achieved."¹⁶⁰ The notification went out on November 6, but on November 7, Superintendent Schmidt received a letter from HEW informing him that the agency was withdrawing the plan because it was based upon obsolete information and data. HEW advised Schmidt to move forward with soliciting community input and suggested the county propose its own desegregation plan by December 31. To "correct the number of false rumors and the rising apprehension and concern of parents," Schmidt's office informed the media that HEW had withdrawn the plan.¹⁶¹

On the evening of November 19, 400 citizens, about 300 of them black,¹⁶² accepted the board's invitation and came to voice their concerns about the proposed school closings. "Few speakers supported integration as an end in itself," Carl Sims reported the next day in the *Washington Post*. Clear about their expectations, however, black speakers said their "primary concern was quality of education."

159. Sims, "Negroes Build Strength in Prince George's."

160. Ibid.

161. Ibid.

162. Ibid.

Decisively, they conveyed that "integration was seen as a desirable, but not a necessary, corollary to it."¹⁶³

The spokesperson for the combined civic associations of Chapel Oaks, Fairmont Park, and North Englewood – where Fairmont Heights High and Bethune Junior High were located – addressed the board's failure to transfer white students from the overcrowded Bladensburg and Central high schools, both with majority-white populations, to the under-capacity, all-black Fairmont Heights, which enrolled 900 students but "could accommodate more than 1,300 students." The associations also pressed the board to integrate its own offices "by demonstrating a more fair placement of blacks on the supervisory and clerical levels."¹⁶⁴

A representative for the county NAACP also addressed the board that evening. Monroe Williamson, chairman of the association's education subcommittee, said its members were "striving to make Prince George's County the best area in which to raise [their] families" and proposed that, "rather than busing black children *only* into former white schools," the board initiate "the concept of dual busing."

Williamson addressed academic matters, as well, asking the board to update the school district's social studies and history curricula. He testified that the teaching resources portrayed racist representations and argued that the textbooks were "completely biased, with stereotyped tendencies." Williamson stressed that the

163. Ibid.

164. "Community Positions on Racial Segregation" (November 18, 1968), Box 3, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

curriculum's materials did not "adequately meet the needs of the student in understanding and/or coping with the complexities of social change." He also asked the board to "make every effort to remove the word 'token' as in 'token integration,' from the vernacular."¹⁶⁵

The PTA representative for Beaver Heights Elementary, Isaac Cook, read a statement the parents had drafted at a call-meeting after receiving notice of the public hearing. They criticized the school board's failure to rezone white children to schools in black neighborhoods and articulated the standard they had set for their school. Cook told the board that it should take "any steps, necessary" to develop Beaver Heights into "a model school, a school which any student of the county should want to attend."¹⁶⁶

In front of the school board and their white neighbors, the black parents at this meeting delivered a message that race theorist Derrick Bell would some thirty-five years later reiterate, that families, "regardless of race, seek schools providing high-quality education in a setting with shared community values, safety, proximity, and respect for parents."¹⁶⁷

165. "NAACP Statement to the Board of Education" (November 19, 1968) Box 7, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

166. "Desegregation of the Eight All Negro Schools of Prince George's County" (November 7, 1968) Box 7, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers. Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

167. Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 172.

Chapter 6: The Typical Suburb

Through neighborhood issues focused on engaging and revitalizing black neighborhoods, and with the guidance of community empowerment organization, residents of some Prince George's neighborhoods learned to advocate for their own interests. Rejecting an HEW desegregation proposal that was as demoralizing as the school district's own plans had been, black residents were presented with an experimental curriculum for the all-black Fairmont Heights High School, developed and proposed by several progressive educators from Harvard University. The constant preparation of new proposals demonstrated that the local black community was active in the desegregation process. Its objections impacted decision making, but most of the district's proposals still failed to grasp how deeply the black community was committed to the schools in their own neighborhoods, and to recognize the vitality of those schools.

Responding to the black community's strong opposition to closing the five county schools that still were operating with all-black or at least ninety-percent black enrollments, HEW proposed a revised plan in April 1969. The most extreme recommendation in the revised proposal involved discontinuing the high school program at Fairmont Heights in the 1970-71 school year and moving the Mary McLeod Bethune Junior High across the street into the larger, former high school building, enabling more desegregation at Bethune.

The 928 students, all black, enrolled at Fairmont Heights High would be transferred at the beginning of the 1970-71 school year to two different, overcrowded,

predominantly white high schools – Bladensburg High, less than two miles north of Fairmont Heights, and Central High, about the same distance to the south. Largo High, a new school, was under construction and would absorb some of the relocated Fairmont Heights students, thus alleviating the overcrowding at Bladensburg and Central.

The HEW proposal would move some white children from Bladensburg Junior High to the relocated Bethune Junior High, enabling the county for the first time to accomplish two-way busing – black *and* white students transported deliberately to achieve integration, which several black civic associations had called for in 1968. The vacated Bethune Junior High building could be used as "a model learning center for children confined to an all-Negro neighborhood and segregated education," HEW suggested.¹⁶⁸

For all its effort and purposeful planning, HEW had discounted the community's desire to keep Fairmont Heights High operating as a senior high school. Only five months earlier the NAACP and other groups had "unequivocally opposed"¹⁶⁹ closing Fairmont Heights High, opposition that HEW carelessly interpreted as allegiance only to the physical structure. In a statement sent to the press on April 12, 1969, U.S. Congressman Lawrence J. Hogan of Maryland accused HEW of being "totally aloof from Prince George's school problem." Superintendent

168. Peter Osnos, "Pr. George's Gets 2nd HEW School Plan," *Washington Post*, April 11, 1969.

169. "Jesse J. Warr/NAACP, Statement Before the Board of Education" (January 9, 1962), Box 3, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

Schmidt said some of the residents who had telephoned his office about HEW's April proposal were Fairmont Heights High graduates who opposed "leaving the community without a high school."¹⁷⁰

The school board rejected the plan. Although HEW was aligned with blacks on the general principle that school desegregation would equalize educational opportunities, HEW agents working throughout the South developed a reputation for leaving black schools, students, teachers, administrators, and communities feeling abandoned. Recounting the closing of the all-black E.E. Butler High School in Gainesville, Georgia, in 1969, a former student said it was "nearly a century of black education that got slammed shut."¹⁷¹ Some Gainesville residents blamed the closing on the lack of determined black leadership. Educator Winfred Pitts, who later researched the closing and its impact on the black people of Gainesville, observed: "Although HEW did not order that Butler be closed, the department did approve the board's plan that included the school's closure." Pitts concluded that the desires of the African-American community "were largely ignored by the board and HEW."¹⁷²

The late 1960s in Prince George's County also saw a swell of activism around the governance of county schools. Tired of the seemingly secret way school board members were appointed, with influential Democrats and Republicans forwarding the

170. Peter Osnos, "Hogan Raps HEW School Plan," *Washington Post*, April 13, 1969.

171. Winfred E. Pitts, *A Victory of Sorts: Desegregation in a Southern Community* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2003), 172.

172. *Ibid*, 170.

names of favored party members to the governor, the county NAACP joined fifty-one other organizations, comprising black and white members, to lobby for procedural changes in the nomination of school board members. At the first School Board Nominating Convention, thirty PTAs, thirteen civic associations, "church organizations, and the NAACP submitted their own nominees to fill an upcoming vacancy on the school board. The NAACP nominated Theresa D. Banks, a black community activist and highly regarded educator who had taught in the county's Colored Schools system and still was teaching. The county PTA's nominee, Joanne Goldsmith, a white Democrat, won the nomination and assumed the school board position the following year.¹⁷³

Activism was pivotal to keeping black-community interests before policy makers and enforcement agencies such as HEW. Between 1968 and 1969, there were at least six *Washington Post* reporters covering school desegregation in Prince George's County.¹⁷⁴ Black municipalities, civic associations, and the NAACP were augmented by groups such as the Prince George's Black Action Committee, whose purpose was "to invade the establishment" and help citizens get answers to "questions on zoning, tax assessments, municipal services, annexation, and fair housing."¹⁷⁵

Community leadership and activism during the period also were being fostered within

173. "Convention Nominates Five for School Board," *Washington Post*, May 22, 1969.

174. In 1968 and 1969, David Hardy, Charles Krause, Lawrence Feinberg, Lawrence Meyer, Peter Osnos, Carl Sims, and Douglas Watson were reporting on school desegregation in Prince George's County for the *Washington Post*.

175. Sims, "Negroes Build Strength in Prince George's."

the federally funded Model Cities program, a component of President Lyndon Johnson's endeavor to assist communities in developing economically and structurally. In Prince George's County, the Model Cities program focused on revitalizing a number of neighborhoods east and north of where the county intersected Washington, D.C., a segment of suburbia representative of the "contiguous spillover" from major urban areas in the 1970s.¹⁷⁶ The target area for revitalization included the town of Fairmount Heights and its cluster of several neighboring black communities. Model Cities staff worked to ensure blacks living outside of the county's incorporated communities had as much a voice in county affairs as residents living within the incorporated neighborhoods, where mayors and town councils wielded influence with county and state legislators.¹⁷⁷

Black residents' civic engagement was evident and being noticed. In a November 1968 *Washington Post* article, reporter Carl Sims declared that "Prince George's may well serve as the first testing ground for black activism in Washington's black suburbs." Sims suggested that "perhaps more than a drive for black power and integration as such, the distinguishing characteristic in Prince George's is a typically

176. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Sheltered Crisis: The State of Fair Housing in the Eighties, September 26-27, 1983, 1984*, 32, accessed May 4, 2014, <https://www.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr12f133.pdf>.

177. Sims, "Negroes Build Strength in Prince George's." North Brentwood, Fairmount Heights, and Glenarden were among the county's incorporated black towns.

suburban – and middle class – interest in the quality of educational programs, master plans, zoning controls, libraries and sidewalks."¹⁷⁸

The county's leaders should have taken heed. Blacks in Prince George's County were civic minded, expected their taxes to provide the same services white taxpayers received, and were more and more willing to confront county leaders with these expectations.

In July 1968, two months after receiving and rejecting HEW's drastic April desegregation proposal, Superintendent Schmidt, with approval of the school board, submitted an entirely new – and experimental – proposal. With \$12 million in federal funding at risk if the district continued operating Fairmont Heights as a segregated school and drawing its enrollment only from the surrounding black communities, Schmidt and the board still could not commit to drawing a plan that would decisively assign white children to Fairmont Heights High.

The board's proposal for accomplishing desegregation was the adoption of an experimental program described broadly as "enriched" and "new and innovative." Called the Model Urban Cooperative High School and packaged with the Model Neighborhoods Initiative, the program would render a complete curriculum change at Fairmont Heights.¹⁷⁹ More significantly for Schmidt, its "strengthened" curriculum

178. Sims, "Negroes Build Strength in Prince George's"; Lawrence Meyer, "County Delays Fairmont High Action," *Washington Post*, June 25, 1969.

179. Lawrence Feinberg, "Fairmont Begins to Find Black Is Beautiful," *Washington Post*, October 12, 1969.

would possibly entice white students from Bladensburg High to enroll at Fairmont Heights in an open registration arrangement, enabling the county to finally desegregate Fairmont Heights.¹⁸⁰ The program was developed and proposed by a team of Boston-area educators, including two former students of Harvard University's graduate school of education.

In a meeting with HEW two months earlier, Superintendent Schmidt and Model Cities staff, in a rare instance of agreement, had endorsed the Harvard plan. Schmidt did so in acquiescence to residents' desire to keep the school open, and also to counter HEW's proposal to close it. HEW was nonetheless reticent to endorse it and warned the school district not to rely on its approval, saying "it was doubtful the agency would consider an experiment at Fairmont Heights to be tantamount to desegregation."¹⁸¹ Still, Schmidt went ahead and submitted the Harvard initiative as the district's counterproposal to HEW's April proposal, and also as the key strategy for accomplishing integration at Fairmont Heights High in the 1970-71 school year.

A month before he sent the experimental initiative to HEW for approval, Superintendent Schmidt had informed Fairmont Heights High teachers, staff, and students of the Harvard initiative in a schoolwide meeting. The faculty criticized Schmidt and the three school board members who were present at the June 23 meeting for moving ahead and adopting the Harvard plan, including hiring a

180. Peter Osnos, "Schmidt Proposes Negro School Plan," *Washington Post*, June 4, 1969; Lawrence Meyer, "County Delays Fairmont High Action."

181. Peter Osnos, "Prince George's Integration Talks Futile," *Washington Post*, May 2, 1969.

principal, without having further involved them in the discussions. The model program would require a complete curriculum change, one that the Harvard group had written and would oversee. Fairmont Heights social studies teacher Myrtle Fentress accused Schmidt of marginalizing and exploiting the all-black staff: "You're so against the times," Fentress told Schmidt. "This isn't what we need or want. This is another instance of outsiders telling Negroes what they need. I think the only difference this time is that our carpetbaggers came with briefcases."¹⁸²

Three months later, when the 1968-69 school year opened, the three-man Harvard team began promoting and developing the Model Urban Cooperative curriculum they would implement in September 1969, a year away. Still doubtful the experimental initiative would actually lure white students, HEW directed the school district to heavily promote the Harvard program within the white communities near Fairmont Heights.¹⁸³ The Harvard team – Alvin Fortune, who would take over as Fairmont Heights principal, and two administrative planners – prepared to implement their program at Fairmont Heights High the next year.

The experimental program did not have the sincere endorsement of Superintendent Schmidt, who averted every attempt to assign white students to Fairmont Heights High and now endorsed the Harvard initiative only to secure the school district's federal subsidy. HEW officials viewed the model urban school initiative as a passive, hit-or-miss desegregation strategy

182. Lawrence Meyer, "School Plan Draws New Opposition."

183. Lawrence Meyer, "Students Seek to Aid Desegregation," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1970.

In February 1970, new attendance boundary maps drawn by administrative planning staff showed that white students in Cheverly had been zoned to attend Fairmont Heights the next September. The school board had habitually failed to activate the maps its planners had designed. Determined it would not overtly and administratively desegregate Fairmont Heights High, the board had decided to adopt the Harvard plan as a way to enable desegregation but not require it. However, as negotiations with HEW now made it necessary, the desegregation of Fairmont Heights based on the redrawn maps would go forward. The new boundary maps would see 536 white and 99 black students from Bladensburg High transferred to Fairmont Heights High,¹⁸⁴ and 217 black students from Fairmont Heights High¹⁸⁵ moved to the predominantly white Central High. Fairmont Heights' neighbor, Bethune Junior High, which the county had allowed to remain all-black since its opening in 1962, also would be desegregated for the first time when the 1970-71 school year started, with 273 white children transferring there from Bladensburg Junior High, and 209 white children and 39 black from Kentland Junior High.¹⁸⁶

After months of volleying between county school officials and HEW, only one of the five schools HEW had in August 1968 recommended closing, North

184. Lawrence Meyer, "Parents Sue Over Schools," *Washington Post*, February 19, 1970.

185. David W. Hardy, "Black Fairmount Heights: Fears, Cautious Optimism."

186. Lawrence Meyer, "Parents Sue Over Schools."

Brentwood Elementary, would be closed. It operated through the 1969-70 school year.¹⁸⁷

187. Peter Osnos, "Pr. George's Gets 2nd HEW School Plan."

Chapter 7: Too Long, Discrimination

From both the pro-desegregation and anti-desegregation perspectives, the federal government's role in desegregating the nation's schools frequently felt as much like imposition as enforcement. Throughout the 1970s, negotiations between the county school board and the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare regarding the planned closings of several black elementary schools, along with the initiation of a federally funded urban renewal program in the Lakeland community, created disillusion, frustration, and, eventually, feelings of irreparable loss among some black county residents.

In March 1969, Dervey Lomax of Lakeland, a black community located within the municipal boundaries of College Park, was once again testifying before the county board of education on a school desegregation issue. Eight years earlier, Lomax had contested the school board's denial of his request to transfer his young son to a nearby white school, under the school district's freedom-of-choice desegregation policy. He had taken his plea to the state board of education and won a concession to allow his child to integrate College Park Elementary School. This time, Lomax was among about one hundred people, including fellow Lakelanders and residents of Berwyn Heights and College Park, neighboring white communities. The group was debating proposals for eliminating segregation in the elementary schools located within those communities – Lakeland, Berwyn Heights, and College Park. HEW had already recommended closing Lakeland, but the school board was considering two other possible plans for the three schools: closing Lakeland and busing the community's children to the near-capacity Berwyn Heights and the overcapacity

College Park, the schools where Lomax had not been permitted to enroll his son in 1961; or constructing a new school in the Lakeland community, one that would accommodate the children at Berwyn Heights Elementary and College Park Elementary – and also achieve integration.

While some whites preferred having Lakeland children bused into their communities, others, including College Park Mayor William Gullett, "stressed that the largely Black community had been discriminated against for too long" and opposed actions that would render more harm, including dividing Lakeland children between two schools.¹⁸⁸ The story of Lakeland Elementary was part of a larger narrative that involved even greater loss, and trauma, for residents of the sixty-seven-year-old black community. Beginning in the 1960s, federal urban renewal funds that Lakeland residents were told would be used for housing upgrades, flood control engineering, and other infrastructure projects within their community were redirected elsewhere. As a result, "a large proportion of the HUD funds was spent improving parts of College Park outside of the urban renewal area" while destroying much of Lakeland.¹⁸⁹ "From the 1960s through the mid-1980s, the urban renewal project in Lakeland demolished many family homes, displaced 104 of 150 households, and replaced much of the neighborhood with a mix of subsidized townhouses, high-density apartments largely inhabited by students, and an elder housing facility,"

188. Douglas Watson, "Pupil Busing Idea Assailed," *Washington Post*, March 12, 1969.

189. Grey Gundaker and Cowan Tynes, *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 185.

according to the Lakeland Community Heritage Project, an organization dedicated to preserving the town's history and memory.¹⁹⁰

At public hearings, persistent Lakeland residents, organized as the Project Area Committee, had firmly debated with mayor St. Clair Reeves and developer Leon Weiner.¹⁹¹ Weiner had presented a redevelopment plan that included two seven-story apartment complexes, one for senior citizens and the other for University of Maryland faculty and staff, as well as forty units of federally subsidized townhouses, twenty-six single-family town homes, and seven single-family homes. In an August 11, 1977, Agnes Gross, a Lakeland resident for more than fifty years, questioned why only six new single-family homes had been built. "To say we couldn't buy them, or afford it, should be left up to us to decide whether we can or cannot." meeting, Lakeland resident Samuel Hollomand pressed city and project officials on the question of displaced Lakelanders. "They would like to move back to Lakeland. Why aren't they consulted?" Hollomand inquired. His wife, Mary, asked why all the plans presented that evening were "for others, for outsiders. Where is the development for us?"¹⁹²

Weiner, the developer, told a reporter, "That land has been paid for by all the people in College Park. They have some notion that all the land belongs to them. It doesn't."¹⁹³

190. Lakeland Community Heritage Project, 8.

191. Gundaker and Tynes, 185.

192. Sharon Conway, "Lakeland Plan Upsets Residents," *Washington Post*, August 11, 1977.

193. *Ibid.*

Personal documents from the period reveal the sense of loss and powerlessness among Lakelanders as they faced the probable closing of the community school. Humanities scholar JoAnne Braxton, a Lakeland native, reflected in a 1998 essay on the ways "resistance emerged"¹⁹⁴ in the notes some Lakeland residents kept during the painful transformation of their community. Braxton's brother Billy Weems recorded, typed, and distributed to his neighbors notes from Project Area Committee meetings. He also kept personal notes, such as this one:

"What's really happening is that the heart of Lakeland has been removed. (School transplant.)" Lakeland has *low enrollment* ... qualified teachers, cafeteria-gym-auditorium combined, limited traffic and spacious playgrounds. It would be more sensible to lighten the load than create *more* load to the overloaded. It would be cheaper (tax wise) to bring 2 or 3 busses in than it would be 6 or 7 buses out. After all, a parent should have something to say about the educating process of his child."¹⁹⁵

With the school board having reversed its initial recommendation to close Lakeland Elementary, it endorsed the option proposed in March 1969, to keep Lakeland operating until 1972, when children from both Lakeland and Berwyn Heights elementary schools would be relocated to an all-new school to be built in Lakeland. Children from College Park Elementary would not be transferred to the new school.

Plans for construction of the school involved the county's expropriation of several of Lakeland's older homes and, thus, the displacement of those families. The childhood home of Robert R. Gray was among the Lakeland properties the county

194. Gundaker and Tynes, 186.

195. Ibid, 188.

would be claiming. Gray had been principal of the Fairmount Heights Elementary School since its opening in 1934, and he lived with his wife in the town of Fairmount Heights, where he also was mayor. Three of his older siblings, all over sixty years of age, still shared the family home. Gray's correspondence with county officials in 1969 and 1970 also conveys the despair members of the Lakeland community experienced as a consequence of school desegregation and urban renewal, as well as the efforts they made to retain personal and community integrity.

Gray wrote in August 1969: "It is hard for me to explain my feelings about the property to you, or to anyone who has not been at my end of the rope. To think of losing what has been my home all of my life is one thing; but to think of being forced to relocate my family at this stage in its life is quite another."¹⁹⁶

With the terms of releasing the property to the county settled, Gray sent another letter in March 1970:

We are today ... signing this proposed contract, with regrets. ... Since I appeared before the Board, in November, we have lost one of our sisters, who probably felt the pressure of being forced out of the house, where she had lived since her early childhood. We are trying to soften the blow for the others. ... My sincere hope is that you, nor any of those involved, nor your families, will ever become victims of such a transaction.¹⁹⁷

The school that was constructed on the properties that had belonged to Lakeland families was named Paint Branch Elementary. The name identified the new

196. "Letter from Robert R. Gray to Elliott B. Robertson" (August 4, 1969), in the Gray family's possession, Prince George's County, Maryland, shared with author by niece Jean Gray Matthews, July 2017.

197. "Memorandum from Robert R. Gray to Elliott B. Robertson" (March 4, 1970), in the Gray family's possession, Prince George's County, Maryland, shared with author by niece Jean Gray Matthews, July 2017.

school's proximity to an Anacostia River tributary, but it in no way commemorated the community's significance in the education of black children throughout the county for nearly seventy years.

Members of the Lakeland community readily participated in debates about the fate of their local school and expressed their desire for it to continue operating for Lakeland children and those in the larger College Park community. The school board's decision to close the school and construct a new one within the neighborhood could not be wholly celebrated by Lakeland residents, as construction of the new school was only one phase of the city and state's urban renewal plan for the community. As the state took possession of residents' land and homes, and as their school was demolished, Lakeland parents and children in the 1970s experienced the desegregation of county schools, itself a disruptive experience, through the loss and emotional trauma of watching half their community disappear and many of their friends relocate.

Chapter 8: Miles Apart

The desegregation of the overwhelmingly white Bladensburg High and its neighbor, the all-black Fairmont Heights High, were pivotal to bringing Prince George's County into compliance with federal desegregation requirements. Between 1968 and 1970, violent racial conflict at several county high schools, including Bladensburg, coincided with "a new nationwide crescendo in high school disturbances." Racial conflict among the nation's high school students was so regular an occurrence, the Washington Post's Eric Wentworth described the situation as "popping with an ominous staccato in the Washington suburbs, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and other communities around the country." Wentworth cited studies that revealed student protests to be frequently grounded in such concerns as "school authority" and "indifference," while a study done by the National Association of Secondary School Principals revealed that "black students attending integrated schools frequently protest ... because they feel that even there they are being treated as second-class citizens." Yet another study Wentworth cited found "racial protest" to have been a factor in 132 uprisings among 348 high schools studied. Alarmed by the trend, Commissioner James E. Allen at the U. S. Department of Education sent a special, nationwide message to state-level education chiefs and secondary school principals urging them "to take the initiative in improving communications and meeting urgent student needs," Wentworth reported.¹⁹⁸

198. Eric Wentworth, "High Schools Act to Defuse Protests," *Washington Post*, September 21, 1969.

The advice did not register at Bladensburg High. There, racial dissension and school-day disturbances combined with the principal's routine capitulation to the interests of white students provoked black parents and the county NAACP to appeal to the governor for protection of the school's black students.

During the same period at Fairmont Heights High, black social studies teacher Myrtle Fentress led her school's pushback against school district leaders who, anticipating the enrollment of white students and hoping to ease white parents' angst, approved an overhaul of the school's curriculum and the replacement of its principal without conferring with the faculty. Fentress exemplified the activist- and reform-minded public school teacher, constantly agitating for a desegregation process that fairly engaged black teachers and students, and also recognized the value and integrity of the black school.

Bladensburg High School

In June 1968, as Wayne Curry's diplomatic tenure at Bladensburg High was winding down and graduation neared, white-community opposition to the increasing black enrollment at the school was tangible. In September, a few weeks into the new school year, racial tensions at Bladensburg boiled over. Both the *Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun* reported consecutive days of "racial disturbances" that led to arrests and injuries.¹⁹⁹ Over the next five years, the county school board continued to drag out the process of more broadly desegregating Prince George's County schools,

199. Thomas Candus, "Prince George's Executive Wants to Put End to Busing," *Baltimore Sun*, December 10, 1997.

ignoring directives of the Supreme Court and the federal government, sparking contention between black and white communities, and prompting some black parents to sue the school system to force comprehensive desegregation.

In mid-September 1969, the administrators, teachers, parents, and students at Bladensburg High were trying to get to the bottom of a tense situation among the "estimated 300 to 500 black students and 2,000 whites" enrolled there.²⁰⁰ Saying David Dean, the principal, had refused their request for a meeting to discuss adding a black studies course to the curriculum and including more black students in extracurricular activities, black student leaders led a sit-in on the morning of Wednesday, September 17 to call attention to their concerns. About two hundred black students participated in the protest. Several black parents were called in to join the meeting, which ended with the administration's commitment to add a black studies course to the curriculum and sponsor a black culture organization that would be open to all students.

Those concessions and black students' inclusion on the school's cheerleading squads, notwithstanding, one student was dismayed by the sense of token inclusion. "I feel it should be that they want to have us, not that they have to put up with us. The problem is that we're a minority out here." Black student leader Michelle Wilson

200. Peter Osnos and Carl W. Sims, "Police Seize 59, Restore Order to Bladensburg," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1969.

provided philosophical reasoning for the black students' actions, "Before a man can relate to another man, he's got to learn who is he. And this is what we want."²⁰¹

The day after the black students' protest, about two-hundred-fifty white students engaged in a sit-in "to show the school administration that white students could 'get away' with the same things that blacks did." The action led to a police-supervised morning standoff, with white students gathered in the school's upstairs cafeteria and black students in the downstairs cafeteria. By lunch time, black student leaders had been called in to negotiate the situation with the white protestors, and white leaders had been sent to speak with the black student protesters. By lunch time, the school was operating normally.²⁰² The next day, although nearly half the student body stayed home to avoid trouble, the residual tensions – "fist fights, shouting matches and walkouts by both whites and blacks," as well as loitering in the hallways or outside the school – led Principal Dean to send students home.²⁰³ Police arrested fifty-nine white students for loitering outside the school for "offenses ranging from unlawful assembly to carrying a concealed weapon."²⁰⁴

201. Kirk Scharfenberg, "200 Stage Sit-in at Bladensburg," *Washington Post*, September 18, 1969.

202. Dave McNeely, "Racial Fights Renewed at Bladensburg," *Washington Post*, September 19, 1969.

203. Carl W. Sims, "Fire Principal, NAACP Insists," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1969.

204. Osnos and Sims, "Police Seize 59, Restore Order to Bladensburg."

The previous school year also had started violently at Bladensburg and other county high schools, as local papers reported a spree of race-related fighting there, as well as at DuVal and Parkdale from September 24 through November 1, 1968.²⁰⁵

Sandra White Minor was a first-year student at Bladensburg in the fall of 1968 and remembers that the small group of black students who arrived at the school that year "came in with vigilance, saying, 'They don't have enough for us.'" Among the issues the students advocated was a curriculum change: "We wanted black history," Minor says.

She recalls that the September 1969 incident began with black and white students sitting in the hallways.

We refused to go to class. It got real stirred up because the black kids were on one side, and the white kids were on the other side. I don't remember it getting to a full-fledged fight. I remember there were spots of fights. ... It got so bad, and Channel 4 was there. ... I went to my girlfriend's house and called my mother and said, 'Mr. Dean told us we had to go home. There was going to be a riot.'²⁰⁶

A week after the incidents at the school, black parents and students from Bladensburg High met at the Glenarden Town Hall to address the racial issues at the school. Local NAACP officials engaged in three hours of testimony about Bladensburg's "apparent disinterest" in its black students. The assembly agreed to

205. Peter Osnos, "Police Patrol DuVal High to Calm Race Unrest," *Washington Post*, October 29, 1968; "Police Called Again to Parkdale School," *Washington Post*, November 2, 1968.

206. White Minor.

officially ask for a more structured process of involving parents in disciplinary matters and to ask for the removal of Bladensburg High principal David Dean.²⁰⁷

Representatives of a group called Concerned Black Citizens also spoke to the audience to gain support of their effort to remove a county police detective who had recently fatally shot a black person fleeing pursuit in the Fairmount Heights community. Converging school desegregation with other race issues, the NAACP agreed to support that group's efforts. The very next evening at the school board meeting, NAACP representatives distributed a briefing to school board members, advising them that the chapter had sent a telegram to Governor Marvin Mandel requesting federal troops be sent to Prince George's "to protect Negroes from the county police."²⁰⁸

Within the week, NAACP officers wrote the school district officially asking for Principal Dean at Bladensburg to be removed because of his failure to resolve the racial conflicts at the school. Black school board member Jesse J. Warr, who also served on the NAACP executive board, said he would ask for Dean's dismissal if an investigation found he had violated the district's discipline guidelines.²⁰⁹ The Maryland Secretary of State, Blair Lee III, agreed to intervene on behalf of black parents who had reported to him that police stationed at the school were mistreating

207. Sims, "Fire Principal, NAACP Insists."

208. Ibid.

209. Douglas Watson, "Black Students, PTA Back Beleaguered Principal," *Washington Post*, September 27, 1969.

their children. He asked school district administrators to remove the police from the school, but district leaders said they "would not commit themselves."²¹⁰ Principal Dean, however, had the backing of the student government organization and the majority of the school's PTA executive board. The one black member of the executive board abstained from voting on the issue.²¹¹ The school board did not take up the issue of removing Dean but in November approved a resolution supporting his efforts at Bladensburg.²¹²

210. "Police to Guard High School," *Washington Post*, September 22, 1969.

211. *Ibid.*

212. Lawrence Meyer, "Desegregation Bid Accepted," *Washington Post*, November 26, 1969.

Fairmont Heights High

When Fairmont Heights High School opened in 1950 to serve black students in the northern and western sections of Prince George's County, the senior high grades from Lakeland were moved to the new school. Their social studies teacher, Myrtle Fentress, moved with them. She had come to Prince George's County to teach not long after graduating Hampton Institute, along with "a number of other young teachers who weren't much older than we were," recalls Carroll S. Matthews, a member of Fairmont Heights High's first graduating class in 1950.²¹³ His wife, Jean Gray Matthews, has her class of 1952 photo sitting in a silver frame on the piano of their home. In their eighties, they effortlessly remember the names of the teachers, principals, coaches, and classmates who helped give the school a symbolic role in county history.

A 1957 *Washington Post* article on Fairmont Heights High described an American high school where the students could have been black or white: "the red-brick building rambles over its hillside" [and] "parents run carpools ... for the many extracurricular activities." In its first two decades, the school was led by James G. Gholson, "a man with quiet authority." Gholson had come to Prince George's from Virginia, where he worked at Hampton Institute's demonstration school. While principal at Fairmont Heights, he lived in the community with his wife and three children. In the 1956-57 school year, Gholson oversaw an enrollment of 1,641 pupils,

213. Carroll S. Matthews, interview with author, October 2, 2016

only three of whom had requested freedom-of-choice transfers in the one year that the policy had been in effect.²¹⁴

The *Post* article noted that Fairmont Heights High offered courses that ranged "from physics to printing; from Spanish to shorthand," as well as "four degrees: academic, general, commercial, and industrial to its student body, which represents a cross section of cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds."²¹⁵ Fred Jennings remembers a Fairmont Heights vocational program that "was second to none." The curriculum offered classes in the "building trades, auto mechanics, sheet metal," Jennings reflected. "I learned to lay bricks there." He also remembered the teachers taking the students to Timonium, near Baltimore, to compete in interscholastic bricklaying competitions.²¹⁶

The attendance zone for Fairmont Heights included black communities that were so distant from the school that some students rode buses "two hours a day on 40- or 60-mile round trips from as far away as Bowie, Laurel, or Accokeek," the *Post* reported.²¹⁷ Remembering the network of neighborhoods and families at the school, Maxine Jennings Gray underscores the point: "It was sure enough community ... definitely community. From Laurel to Accokeek, it was one community."²¹⁸

214. Jean Jones, "Principal Helps Hold Far-flung Pupils Together," *Washington Post*, May 26, 1957.

215. Jean Jones.

216. Jennings.

217. Jean Jones.

218. Jennings Gray.

Since the 1960s, local and federal proposals to close Fairmont Heights have been squelched by alumni, the communities surrounding the school, and cultural preservationists who want the structure to remain a monument to the black community's committed pursuit of education during segregation, and also remain a symbol of community pride. HEW's 1968 proposal to close Fairmont Heights could not have been more indicative of policy makers' and federal agents' detachment from the many students and communities the school had served. A county official proposed in 1974 that the county stop using Fairmont Heights High for schooling and use it instead "for some special purpose." The idea drew opposition from community members who "argued against closing the last senior high school in the county located in a black community."²¹⁹

After a 1980 fire caused considerable damage to parts of the school, some black county leaders wondered if the fire had been set by county officials to justify shutting down the school. Several weeks before the fire, black parents concerned about maintenance negligence at some predominantly black schools, including Fairmont Heights High, had voiced their concerns at a school board meeting.²²⁰

Fairmont Heights High did not close. In August 2017, a new Fairmont Heights High opened on a site two miles from the original school building, which still stands,

219. B.D. Colen, "Fairmont Heights High Closure Is Rejected," *Washington Post*, October 9, 1974.

220. Michael Eastman, "Fairmont Heights High After the Fire," *Washington Post*, January 31, 1980.

a positive sign for some alumni and county residents who hope it will remain as a historical marker of African-American life in the county.

Fairmont Heights High social studies teacher Myrtle Fentress had been an irrepressible muckraker for her students, colleagues, and profession since transferring there from Lakeland. On June 7, 1969, a few days after learning about the Harvard proposal for the school, Fentress wrote a three-page letter to school board member Ruth Wolf addressing school officials' mischaracterizations of the school:

It has been a year of constant frustration for students and teachers as we read stories in the local press that have indicated that the educational experiences in our school are at a very low level. Words such as 'upgrading,' 'raising the level,' and 'strengthening the curriculum' in these stories have suggested that the quality of the teaching and the learning at Fairmont Heights is significantly below that of the other secondary schools in the County. Students and teachers have been taunted on occasions by their colleagues and peers from other schools in the County about the fate of our school. Our friends in the community have been given the impression that ours is a dying school and that our demise is imminent.²²¹

As desegregation planning progressed, some black teachers found their union, Prince George's County Educators' Association, to be unsympathetic to their interests, prompting them in April 1970 to unify under Concerned Black Educators. The immediate incident that prompted black teachers' break from PGCEA was union members' opposition to further desegregating Fairmont Heights High in the fall of 1970 by transferring students from Bladensburg High. While PGCEA's representative council had voted to support the transfer of students to Fairmont Heights plan, a

221. "Myrtle Fentress Letter to Ruth S. Wolf – Defense of Fairmont Heights High" (June 7, 1969), Box 3, Folder 9, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

referendum vote of all union members resulted in a 2,168 to 1,870 vote against the desegregation plan.²²² Writing for the black educators group on April 23, 1970, Joseph Parker, himself a graduate of the county school system and an elementary principal in the school district, said the established union had not been "responsive to the needs of black people" and that it should be addressing issues that specifically related to black employees, such as "the recruiting and placement of black teachers, promotional policies, the employment of black classified employees and the racial balance of teachers in schools."²²³

In September 1969, as administrators at the nearby Bladensburg High were working to resolve the school's habitual racial conflicts, Alvin V. Fortune was beginning his tenure as principal at Fairmont Heights High, preparing to oversee an experimental, "enriched curriculum" developed within the Model Urban Cooperative initiative.²²⁴ A writer at the *Washington Post* aptly conveyed the irony of the situations at the two schools, one tensely integrated, and the other nonchalantly segregated: "While white and Negro students were fighting at Bladensburg High School last month, students at all-Negro Fairmont Heights High, two miles away, were organizing support for their new black principal."²²⁵

222. Stephen Neary, "Black Teachers Form Own Pr. George's Group," *Washington Post*, April 27, 1970.

223. "Joseph M. Parker, position paper of Concerned Black Educators" (April 20, 1970), Box 3, Folder 9, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

224. Lawrence Meyer, "County Delays Fairmont Action."

225. Lawrence Feinberg, "Fairmont Begins to Find Black Is Beautiful."

Fortune, a former high school physical education teacher in the Boston area, was the only black member of the Harvard team that wrote the proposal for the urban high school initiative. He started his job not only with the challenge of diversifying the formerly one-hundred percent black student body, but also with a challenge to his professional credentials hanging in the air. The county teachers' union had informed Superintendent Schmidt that Fortune did not have Maryland administrative certification credentials, disqualifying him to serve as principal. The union, however, had set aside their fight against Fortune's appointment in response to unified support Fairmont Heights students and teachers offered him.²²⁶

Still, on September 15, with Fortune already on the job, a near-unanimous vote by the representative council of the Prince George's County Educators' Association, supported by the Maryland Teachers' Association, called for his removal as head administrator at Fairmont Heights. The Fairmont Heights staff were divided over the issue, with some teachers committed to the existing academic program and others open to experimenting with the model urban school program.²²⁷ Two days after the union voted and as rumors circulated about possible protests by Fairmont Heights students, who supported Fortune, the Fairmont Heights staff voted among themselves,

226. Ibid.

227. Dave McNeely, "Teachers Oppose Fairmont Director," *Washington Post*, September 16, 1969.

unanimously deciding to avoid further disruption of the school by asking the union to reverse its decision and allow Fortune to remain at the school.²²⁸

Myrtle Fentress had questioned the decision to adopt the Harvard plan, but feeling marginalized by the union and frustrated with the negative portrayals of the school, she switched her allegiance to Fortune. Fentress argued that making an administrative change with the school year under way would be disruptive. Along with colleagues Eddyce Pope and David Sapp, fellow union representatives, Fentress wrote a letter to members of the Prince George's County Educators' Association challenging the vote of the union's Representative Assembly. Fentress, Pope, and Sapp said that the school's faculty had not been made aware the assembly was planning to act on the matter of the principal at the meeting and, moreover, that the Fairmont Heights staff had been left out of the negotiations regarding Fortune's future at the school.²²⁹

Fentress and her colleagues said "removing the top administrator from Fairmont Heights High at this time would be disastrous," and that "the education of the 950 students presently enrolled supersedes any action regarding the certification and/or selection procedure for administrative staff." Adding that they planned to introduce a motion to rescind the representative assembly's vote, they closed by

228. "Faculty Asks New Director Be Detained," *Washington Post*, September 18, 1969.

229. "Myrtle Fentress Letter to PGCEA Representative Assembly" (September 17, 1969), Box 3, Folder 9, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

asking for their colleagues' support "in the interest of the future of the educational program at Fairmont Heights High School."²³⁰

With Fentress' advisement, the Student Organizing Committee solicited support for Fortune from the countywide Student Government Organization. Responding affirmatively to the Fairmont Heights students' request, the countywide SGO then wrote board member Ruth Wolf conveying their "support of the Fairmont Heights students in their struggle to retain a principle for whom they have a great deal of respect and admiration."²³¹

The Fairmont Heights students understood that the Harvard program was being used to lure white students to the school, and they wanted to retain a sense of ownership and have a say in what would happen next. "The best thing that could happen would be if they left Fairmont Heights the way it is," a Fairmont Heights student told a newspaper reporter in the fall of 1969. "We have school pride. We don't want whites taking it over." Another student predicted that integration would bring dissension and that "there'd be fights all the time, every day. Nobody would go to school."²³²

A Fairmont Heights parent said about the plan, "Isn't this just a way of making the school good enough for whites, to draw them to our school? They wouldn't do this

230. Ibid.

231. "Fairmont Heights Student Organizing Committee Letter to SGO" (September 19, 1969), Box 3, Folder 9, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

232. Lawrence Feinberg, "Fairmont Begins to Find Black Is Beautiful."

just for our children." Students and parents were defending and affirming the value of an all-black high school and resisting what they viewed as the imposition of white authority and dominance. Students had independently formed their own "student action committee" and secured 853 of 960 student signatures on a petition declaring their allegiance to the principal: "We feel that Mr. Alvin Fortune is the best thing that has happened to Fairmont Heights High School in a long time," the petition read. "We will do everything within our moral, legal rights to stop any decision removing him."²³³

Motivated more by Schmidt's desire to calm the anxieties of and appease his Cheverly neighbors than by a genuine interest in the quality of instruction at Fairmont Heights, the model urban school had been initiated in a half-hearted and hasty manner. As principal, Alvin Fortune spent the 1969-70 school year directing the program through its planning stages, and engaging students, parents, and the community in discussions on how to best develop and operate it. Despite his efforts and the support from students, faculty, and parents, Fortune and his team of planners from Harvard were informed in April 1970, toward the end of the program's first year, that the Prince George's County school district would not retain the program, nor them, in its 1970-71 budget.

Superintendent Schmidt blamed the decision on budget constraints. However, Harvard team member Todd Endo accused Schmidt of placating the white students in Cheverly who, because of HEW's pressure to speed up desegregation, would be

233. "Douglas Watson, "Fairmont Heights Students Back New Principal," *Washington Post*, September 19, 1969.

reassigned from Bladensburg High to Fairmont Heights High in September 1970. Schmidt's biased and preferential decision making was transparent. According to the *Washington Post*, Schmidt indirectly admitted that the school board had prioritized the academic interests of the mostly white students at Bladensburg High over the academic interests of the mostly black students at Fairmont Heights. While voiding the experimental curriculum, Schmidt and the board had promised the Bladensburg students that they would find when they arrived at Fairmont Heights "the same courses they now have."²³⁴

In his letter of resignation, Endo wrote, "Since the board of education lost its desegregation battle with HEW, the superintendent's interest in the improvement of education at Fairmont Heights High has waned. Since compulsory desegregation was forced upon him, he seems to have concluded that the creation of a model school was unnecessary."²³⁵ Superintendent Schmidt's negative attitude toward desegregation reflected that of his Cheverly neighbors. The cancellation of the program freed him from the pretense of endorsing it.

Desegregating county schools presented unexpected openings for black county residents, enabling the agency and empowerment of black high school students and forging a space for black teachers, marginalized by their professional union, to represent their particular interests. However, it also necessitated the assertive intervention of black parents and students to insist that local and state officials ensure the fair treatment of their children.

234. Lawrence Meyer, "School Program Scrapped," *Washington Post*, April 22, 1970.

235. *Ibid.*

Chapter 9: Integration Is Here

With the integration of Fairmont Heights High slated to take place the following school year, students and parents in the fall of 1969 began anticipating, discussing, and preparing for changes in the culture of this school that had been the pride and joy of black teenagers and teachers for nearly twenty years. Among black families, a full spectrum of viewpoints was evident, from despair and skepticism to optimism and determination to make the process work. In the neighboring, largely white community of Cheverly, a few white parents optimistically prepared their children to attend Fairmont Heights, but the majority of Cheverly parents dreaded integration and were looking for ways to evade sending their children to Fairmont Heights.

The proposed transfer of white students to an all-black school complicates the dominant narrative of school desegregation, which portrays black students as the outsiders waiting to be allowed into all-white schools. In this case, black residents of the county refused to permit the closing of Fairmont Heights. Further, white students were transferred to that school, demonstrating the degree to which black Prince Georgians shaped the desegregation process and the outcomes. Undeterred by the superintendent's indifference, they directly challenged the attitudes and decisions of government leaders at the county, state, and federal levels.

In November 1969, early in Alvin Fortune's brief tenure at Fairmont Heights High, the county board of education had finally received HEW's approval of a plan that would integrate Fairmont Heights and Bethune Junior High, both located within and near the predominantly black communities of Fairmount Heights, Chapel Oaks,

and Cedar Heights, while they also shared a border with the predominantly white community of Cheverly. Under the approved plan, Fairmont Heights High would enroll 536 white students and 99 black students in the 1970-71 school year, all transfers from Bladensburg High. A little more than nine hundred Fairmont Heights students would be dividing between Bladensburg and Central. The rest would continue at Fairmont Heights.²³⁶ On November 29, within a few days of the plan's announcement, a forum of black parents gathered in the Fairmont Heights High library to discuss how the changes could affect the school.

Some parents worried that white students would bring to Fairmont the "indoctrinated" prejudices and hostility that had been on display at Bladensburg.²³⁷ A student suggested there could be power struggles among the white and black students: "I don't think they'll be discriminated against, like we may be in the same situation," he said. "But there is going to be trouble because this school has been here for 20 years. Those little white kids in Cheverly think they own the world and they're going to come in here trying to change things."

A member of the Fairmont Heights bands, declaring his "whole life is music," anguished about going off to Central High, which did not have a band. The parent of a child who also was headed to Central considered the possibility that the quality of education would be better there than it was at Fairmont Heights. She was among "a significant number" who thought so. Other parents, however, contested a public

236. Lawrence Meyer, "Students Seek to Aid Desegregation."

237. David W. Hardy, "Black Fairmount Heights: Fears, Optimism."

statement that county commissioner Gladys Spellman had made, in which she implied a low academic standard at Fairmont.

The shrinking PTA membership at Fairmont Heights was a concern of some of the parents, but optimism lay with a group of fifty who were planning to connect with parents in Cheverly to work on easing "the sensitive transition period ahead."²³⁸ One mother at the forum said the responsibility rested with all the parents to ensure there would be no violence at the school: "As parents, we can start at home right now, teaching our children to accept white students and teachers. It's up to parents to condition their children so they will come to Fairmont Heights with an open mind. All of the children must accept the fact that integration is here."²³⁹

Some Fairmont Heights students, however, were not getting that lesson. After an October loss against county football rival Potomac High, which had a predominantly white enrollment and football team, some Fairmont Heights students had violently rocked the bus carrying the Potomac team, and had thrown stones at the bus and at cars driven by whites.²⁴⁰

Nonetheless, other students were heeding the lesson of conciliation. In January 1970, about twenty-two black students from Fairmont Heights and thirty-five white students from Bladensburg met to inaugurate the Fairmont Heights-Bladensburg High Schools' Student Relations Organization. With the goal of "easing

238. Ibid.

239. Ibid.

240. Lawrence Feinberg, "Fairmont Begins to Find Black Is Beautiful."

integration tension this year to ease integration tension next year," the group at their first meeting agreed to share news in each other's school papers, provide tours of Fairmont Heights for Bladensburg students, and host more joint discussions." The organizers comprised what one girl described as the "elite" students, those who were involved in many activities and would know how to "build up relations" between students from the different schools.²⁴¹

These students' engagement and initiative countered a better known but narrow view of desegregation, in which black school children were the disciplined outsiders valiantly, patiently, and quietly integrating the town's all-white school. Desegregation continued to be thought of by whites and some blacks as an endeavor in which only blacks were required to act, and to do so for the cause, while whites were asked only to be good hosts. This perception had been evident at a March 1969 school desegregation meeting in Lakeland. In debating the question of whether the Lakeland School, in a black community, should remain open and be integrated by white children in two neighboring communities, a white parent said while they would welcome Lakeland children to their schools, they don't want white children transferred to Lakeland to achieve 'reverse integration.'"²⁴² The integration of all-black Fairmont Heights High and Bethune Junior High undermined the assumptions of federal government and local school district officials, for whom closing some

241. Lawrence Meyer, "Students Seek to Aid Desegregation."

242. Douglas Watson, "Pupil Busing Idea Assailed."

black schools and luring white students to Fairmont Heights with a Harvard-inspired curriculum were the most acceptable ways to achieve desegregation.

Cheverly

Early in 1970, some white parents in the town of Cheverly, about a five-minute drive from Fairmont Heights High, initiated a challenge to the rezoning of their children from Bladensburg High to Fairmont Heights, a change that was to become effective in September when the new school year got under way. Cheverly residents were divided in planning how they would respond to the change, with some deciding to abide by the desegregation plan, some considering moving out of Cheverly, and others thinking of enrolling their children in private school. Some of the parents had contacted Fairmont Heights principal Alvin Fortune and were planning an open-house visit to the school; while others discussed filing a lawsuit against the county to stop the transfers altogether.²⁴³ In the spring of 1970, the ambivalence of some residents was further agitated by the school board's announcement that it would not fund the Model Urban School initiative at Fairmont Heights in the 1970-71 school year. The purportedly more challenging academic program Schmidt had thought might stoke white parents' interest in Fairmont Heights would no longer be offered at the school.

Todd Endo, one of the designers of the model program, wrote an angry letter of resignation warning the superintendent and school board that if the program, "which breaks out of the traditional mold of Bladensburg," was not implemented, then Fairmont Heights was "doomed to become another Bladensburg High with its

243. Lawrence Meyer, "In All-White Cheverly: Apprehension, Protest," *Washington Post*, November 30, 1969.

history of racial disorder."²⁴⁴ Endo's warning was rather vague, but he seemed to be suggesting that the racial troubles at Bladensburg had been the result of a lack of attention to the curricular interests of the "urban" or black student, for whom his team's model urban curriculum was designed. However, Endo also was lobbying for adoption of the program. He had made it clear that while his team "supported integration," they were not particularly concerned with it." Implementing the program for the current population of black students at Fairmont Heights was their goal.²⁴⁵

The model urban school was now out of the picture, and parents in Cheverly, who had shown no interest in the endeavor, moved forward with plans to sue the school district to keep their kids out of Fairmont Heights High and Bethune Junior High. Cheverly resident Ruth Davis did not join the suit though, determined her family would not move out of Cheverly and that her daughter would enroll in Bethune in the fall. "The quicker it's accepted, the quicker the transition will be," Davis had said.²⁴⁶ One of her neighbors expressed a viewpoint that was more typical of the residents who opposed the transfers: "I don't think any mother would like to be going over to the [Fairmont Heights High-Bethune] area to pick up her child after a

244. "Todd Endo Resignation Statement" (April 23, 1970), Correspondence 1963-1971 Box 3, Folder 9, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

245. Lawrence Feinberg, "Fairmont Begins to Find Black Is Beautiful."

246. Lawrence Meyer, "In All-White Cheverly: Apprehension, Protest," *Washington Post*, November 30, 1969.

drama club meeting. There is a kind of racial and social antagonism. ... I've heard remarks that they can't wait to get our kids over there."²⁴⁷

Most of the white Bladensburg High students who would be transferring to Fairmont Heights High lived in Cheverly and several nearby, smaller, still mostly white communities, including Radiant Valley, Dodge Park, and Kent Village.²⁴⁸ Some streets in Cheverly were situated closer to Bladensburg High. Others, including those in the town's Ward 4, historically home to black families, were closer to Fairmont Heights High. The neighborhoods of Fairmount Heights, Chapel Oaks, North Englewood, Cedar Heights and others had been home for black families since the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the late 1960s, those black neighborhoods, though not as socio-economically middle-class as Cheverly, were as middle-class as the other white neighborhoods near Bladensburg High, and the graduates of both Fairmont Heights and Bladensburg were attending college at the same rate: thirty-seven percent.²⁴⁹

Unpersuaded that they should send their children to Fairmont Heights, eight Cheverly parents in February 1970 sued the Prince George's County school district to stop the transfers that were scheduled to happen in September, contending it was unconstitutional to use their children's race as a basis for assigning them to a school. A panel of county circuit court judges dismissed the suit two months later, and the

247. Ibid.

248. Ibid.

249. Ibid.

parents sought a ruling by the Maryland Appeals Court, which sent the case back to the county circuit for a more thorough hearing of the arguments. In April 1971, the county circuit court ruled that in redrawing school attendance boundaries to eliminate segregation the county school district was acting within the law. The Supreme Court had just confirmed that to be so in the Charlotte, North Carolina case *Swann vs. Mecklenburg County*, a major follow-up ruling to *Brown*. There, the justices had decided that an extreme redrawing of attendance zones, resulting in noncontiguous boundaries, was an acceptable strategy for effecting the desegregation of schools. The decision also established the legitimacy of racial quotas as a means of determining the effectiveness of a desegregation plan. Basing its decision on that ruling, the Prince George's County Circuit Court ruled that the school board had acted correctly, that "its paramount consideration was the proper education of the children," and that the decision had rendered "no hardship."²⁵⁰

Ten months before the classrooms, hallways, and activities at Fairmont Heights High would be integrated for the first time, black and white children and parents in the communities near the school sorted through their racial attitudes. Blacks looked toward desegregation with cautious optimism, while most white parents conveyed skepticism. Neither group could further stall desegregation of the high school that had been a key factor in ensuring the county's compliance with federal requirements.

250. "School Suit Dismissed in County," *Washington Post*, April 28, 1971.

Chapter 10: Teachers-Role Models

The mandatory desegregation of teachers in American schools left black teachers far more vulnerable than whites to job displacement, transfers, unfair administrative scrutiny and degradation, and all-around professional instability. As the Prince George's County school district reassigned teachers to meet racial quotas, black faculty experienced angst over a number of issues, including being separated from their black students. The issue represented a perpetual conflict in the quest for desegregated schools.

The widely perceived notion among whites and many blacks that education in all-black schools was inherently inferior was a strand in the long and complex narrative of black life in America. The question of "lower education standards"²⁵¹ within the academic program at Fairmont Heights High connected to negative assumptions held by whites and blacks about the quality of instruction at Colored, Negro, and black schools. Political scientist Alvin Thornton suggests that "the deprivation of educational resources to black schools ensured blacks would develop a perception of their schools as inferior."²⁵² It instilled the idea that "everything these poor little children had was bad, and so we need to go rescue them ... the teachers are

251. Lawrence Meyer, "In All-White Cheverly: Apprehension, Protest."

252. Alvin Thornton, interview with author, March 22, 2017.

bad, the curriculum was bad, the parents were bad. Everything was bad," a former teacher told education researchers Richard Milner and Tyrone Howard.²⁵³

In March 1971, Eloise Severinson regional director for the federal Office for Civil Rights, sent a reminder to superintendent Carl W. Hassel, who had replaced Schmidt a month earlier,²⁵⁴ informing him that the school district was legally obligated to desegregate faculty as well as students, a requirement that came out of the 1969 Mississippi case *Singleton v. Jackson*, another legal challenge to *Brown*. As the school district began desegregating faculty, black teachers grew concerned about the possible cultural dissonance between black children and white teachers. Diversifying faculty, though not the conundrum of shuffling and shuttling students, was still challenging, both in meaning and process. Confidently documenting their concerns about the dissolution of the black teacher-black student relationship, black teachers effectively blurred Thurgood Marshall's "unyielding integrationist worldview."²⁵⁵

On March 25, the school board passed a resolution directing the superintendent to initiate staff assignments and transfers so that the number of black teachers in each school would reflect as near as possible the sixteen percent black teacher total in the school system. The board agreed in its final decision on the

253. Milner and Howard, 292.

254. Lawrence Meyer, "Prince George's Names Hassel as School Chief," *Washington Post*, February 21, 1970.

255. Williams, 232. Marshall had said he was willing to put black teachers working in segregated schools out of work and to see historically black colleges shut down to help realize a fully integrated nation.

measure to establish a black teacher representation of fifteen to twenty percent.²⁵⁶

About a year later, on January 29, 1972, the black faculty at Glenarden Woods Elementary directed their concerns about the black teacher-black student relationship to board member Ruth Wolf. Principal Beatrice Henson and the faculty told Wolf that the number of white teachers at their school had exceeded the number of black and urged her to "let this remain as is." Meeting next year's black-white teacher ratio would further decrease the number of black teachers and "create problems for teachers and students," they wrote. Appealing further, they told Wolf:

"Our student body is all black, and we deem it necessary to retain the black teachers who are presently on our staff in order that our black students might have black models to whom they can relate. ... Won't you please consider our unique situation – unique in that our neighborhood and our school are totally black -- and make the necessary concessions ... for the benefit of these children who will ultimately be the ones to suffer if the teachers are removed."²⁵⁷

Changes in faculty assignments necessitated not only racial integration but the integration of teachers with different levels of experience, an issue the Glenarden Woods Elementary staff also raised in their letter:

Last year, we received eight white teachers – new to teaching and new to our county. It was necessary for the remaining black teachers to work arduously with these new teachers in order to continue the quality of education required to meet the needs of our pupils. ... The removal of six more black teachers, who are the experienced teachers in this building, would gravely jeopardize the quality of education required to meet the needs of our pupils.²⁵⁸

256. "Pr. George's Board Votes Racial Balance for Faculty," *Washington Post*, March 26, 1971.

257. "Letter from Glenarden Woods Elementary School Faculty" (February 29, 1972), Staff Integration – Correspondence Box 10, Folder 3, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

258. *Ibid.*

John Gruber, the president of the county teachers union, challenged the teachers' position and wrote school board president James Golato reminding him that the teacher transfer policy already had been negotiated. Gruber urged Golato to prioritize that agreement over black teachers' suggestion that "experienced teachers be exchanged for experienced teachers," which he claimed would be "contrary to educational practices."²⁵⁹ However, members of the county's Association of Elementary School Administrators and Supervisors "voted unanimously" to support the Glenarden Woods faculty out of "respect" for their colleagues' position. Association president Herbert Ryle said members had based their votes on the numbers of teachers each school would lose under the transfer policy, the negative effects on existing school programs, the impact on teacher morale, and "the ultimate criteria – what will be best for the pupils."²⁶⁰

In May, Golato asked his fellow board members to approve a resolution that would stop teacher transfers "until the student integration issue is resolved." The board voted down the resolution, however, reminded by its attorney that the district was under an HEW directive to increase the rate of voluntary faculty integration it

259. "Letter from John Gruber to James Golato" (January 17, 1972), Staff Integration – Correspondence, Box 10, Folder 3, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

260. "Letter, Association of Elementary School Administrators and Supervisors supporting Glenarden Woods Teachers" (March 8, 1972), Staff Integration – Correspondence, Box 10, Folder 3, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

had already begun.²⁶¹ The angst of well-intentioned black school teachers revealed their own racial consciousness as well as concerns for their students' self-esteem within the context of school desegregation. They learned that they could not both protect the interests of their students and also comply with federal desegregation orders, an added disillusionment with the idealistic promise of *Brown*.

261. Ivan Goldman, *Washington Post*, "Board Votes Down Plan to Halt Race Balance Transfers," May 25, 1972.

Chapter 11: Re-Coding Blackness

As black and white students encountered one another in their desegregated classrooms and hallways, they projected their various individual and group identities, and lobbied for influence with school leadership. A typical concern among black students was the "lack of recognition for the race through the absence of black studies." Confidently, they began to press for both curriculum changes and more representation in school activities.²⁶² To some degree, they achieved both.

On April 4, hours before King was assassinated, Maryland Governor Spiro T. Agnew had ordered the arrest of more than two hundred mostly black Bowie State College students who had traveled from the campus in Prince George's County to the Maryland State House in Annapolis to stage a "read-in" they hoped would call attention to dilapidated and neglectful conditions at the century-year-old black teachers college.²⁶³ In the spring of 1970 on the University of Maryland's main campus in College Park, which was within minutes of several Prince George's County high schools, leaders of the Black Student Union pushed the administration to recruit more black faculty and students and to restructure the existing black studies program, among a number of things.²⁶⁴

262. Eric Wentworth, "High Schools Act to Defuse Protests."

263. "Bowie State Is Closed by Agnew After 227 Students Are Arrested," *Baltimore Sun*, April 5, 1968.

264. Douglas Watson, "Black Students List Demands at University of Maryland," *Washington Post*, April 11, 1970.

Political scientist Manning Marable has noted that the mass civil rights stand-offs in southern cities in the 1950s and 1960s were part of a "larger socio-economic, cultural, and political metamorphosis of American race relations."²⁶⁵ Campus protests, calls for black studies courses, and demands for increased representation in school activities were but one facet of a social transformation that, by the early 1970s, also had enabled a "deracialization of popular music."²⁶⁶ Songs, artists, producers, and marketers blurred the lines of difference between black and white teenagers sitting in classrooms together in greater numbers than ever before, and for the first time. This melding of differences within popular culture was quite evident in 1975 when white, British pop star Elton John performed his top-selling song on the nationally syndicated television show "Soul Train," a Chicago-based music-and-dance program marketed to and widely viewed by black teenagers. John was the first white artist to perform on the program, whose engaging black host and youthful black dancers "helped sketch a portrait of black life that was radically ordinary," anthropologist and historian Laurence Ralph has argued.

"The fact that the ritual of watching this show was taking place, simultaneously, in a geographically and racially diverse set of American households

265. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal; An African American Anthology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 367.

266. Ruth Feldstein, "'I Don't Trust You Anymore': Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1349, accessed March 2, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3660176>.

is what helped hone an enduring appreciation for black culture,” Ralph said.²⁶⁷ In the midst of extreme desegregation battles, such cultural "rituals" also established common ground.

Black teenagers in Prince George's County began to experience this deracialization in the early 1970s as a result of desegregation, even before the desegregation court-order went into effect in January 1973. One of a few black students desegregated to Robert Goddard Junior High in the fall of 1972, Charles James recalls hanging out with "some stoners" there and starting to listen to "all that acid music" played more often by white bands. A trombonist and drummer at DuVal High from 1972 to 1975, he recalls that while he "didn't hang out with white musicians" in high school, he and his friends listened to "everything from Sly and the Family Stone, Boston, Led Zeppelin, Earth, Wind and Fire, Elton John."²⁶⁸ Though not a specific goal of *Brown*, school desegregation by the 1970s propelled cultural-crossover sensibilities and behaviors that were evident but more socially taboo in the 1950s and 1960s.

In October 1969, county social studies teachers and school administrators met with black student representatives from the high schools for a "listen in" on the topic of a black studies curriculum. Some students called for separate courses that would focus on contemporary issues, but others thought incorporating black studies into

267. Laurence Ralph, "Love, Peace, and Soul," *Transition* 108 Boogie Man (2012): 26, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/transition.108.19>.

268. James.

other courses would give white students an opportunity "to learn something they don't know" and "see us in a different way."²⁶⁹ A few months later, in February 1970, Maryland's superintendent of education recommended to the state board of education that it require school systems throughout the state to add black studies to their curricula. The state board, however, refused to move on the suggestion.²⁷⁰ Within the year, though, Sandra White Minor's senior year at Bladensburg High, the school had added Black Studies and Asian Studies to the standard Social Studies course offerings – United States History, World History, Psychology, and Geography – as a way of furthering "students' awareness of the world around him" and "our world neighbors."²⁷¹ In 1972-73, the school added two sections of Black Studies, taught by Joseph Sciannella and Anne Fotos, both white. Sciannella also taught a new issues-related course that year, Urban Geography, which "dealt with the planning of cities and the problems facing them."²⁷²

Minor credits earlier black graduates of the school, including alumnus Wayne Curry, for forging a path for the black students who came later. "By the time our class got there, you could just feel the stir-up ... and the classes that followed kept it going." Although the school had a vocational curriculum, "blacks weren't accepted

269. Herbert H. Denton, "Black Studies, Needs Aired in County," *Washington Post*, October 14, 1969.

270. Eric Wentworth, "Maryland Department of Education Urges Black Studies in All Schools," *Washington Post*, Feb. 6, 1970, C1.

271. Bladensburg High School, *Blade* (yearbook), 1971, Bladensburg, Md.

272. *Ibid.*

into the nursing program," Minor said. "We petitioned for that. By the time of my junior year, they made sure there was somebody black in every organization."²⁷³

The complexities and ambiguities of school desegregation could not be separated from the social, cultural, and political movements that young Americans of the era observed and in which they participated. Black students inspired by the core messages of these movements were empowered to establish within their integrated schools a space for themselves, and to locate common ground with white students.

273. White Minor.

Chapter 12: Dismantling the System

Convinced the idle school board would not commit to the large-scale reassignment of white students, the NAACP and American Civil Liberties Union moved forward with a lawsuit against the county school board, on behalf of several black parents.

Responding to Judge Frank A. Kaufman's request for proposals from the school district, two white members of the board drew up a hostile desegregation proposal that provoked black residents' unified, massive resistance against it. Expressing no confidence in the board's commitment to drafting an effective and comprehensive desegregation plan, Judge Kaufman issued a decisive ruling for the plaintiffs, along with a detailed plan for desegregating the school system. Black Prince Georgians continued to influence the execution of the court order, although they certainly did not control it. They both supported desegregation and opposed implementation schemes that unequally burdened their children.

Throughout most of 1971, desegregation efforts in the county increasingly proved to be a stand-off between and among the school superintendent, members of the school board, the teachers' union, HEW, and the community. With an enrollment of 162,000 students, twenty-two percent of whom were black, Prince George's County Public Schools was the tenth-largest school district in the nation.²⁷⁴ Stalled by the anti-desegregation majority on the school board, which still had only one black member, the district's desegregation planning had resulted in nine of the eighteen county high schools still having a white-student population that exceeded ninety

274. Herbert H. Denton, "NAACP Sues County, Asks More Desegregation."

percent, and four high schools still registering black-student enrollment of more than fifty percent.²⁷⁵ Determined to maintain neighborhood-school attendance zones and appease increasingly vehement anti-busing white parent groups, district leaders worked half-heartedly to devise a desegregation plan that would be acceptable to HEW, with five of the nine school board members firmly opposed to using busing as a desegregation tool, despite the Supreme Court's April decision endorsing busing an acceptable way to desegregate schools "in a system that had been deliberately constructed and maintained to enforce racial segregation."²⁷⁶ Mocking HEW's persistence as "the insatiable appetite of a bureaucratic arm of the federal government,"²⁷⁷ the inflexible school board backed themselves into a corner that left them either facing HEW sanctions or forcing the "matter be resolved in the courts," with the latter consequence favored by Maryland Congressman Lawrence Hogan.²⁷⁸

Observing the stalemate and possible derailment of its school desegregation goals for Prince George's County, an NAACP legal representative in New York said the organization had "the matter under active consideration with a view to filing a lawsuit," whether or not HEW went forward with financial sanctions or a suit against

275. Ibid.

276. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 315.

277. Douglas Watson, "Teacher Unit Opposes County School Shifts," *Washington Post*, July 31, 1971.

278. Douglas Watson "Integrate or Face Fund Loss," *Washington Post*, July 30, 1971.

the county.²⁷⁹ Directors of Prince George's Model Cities program so resented the school board's obstructionism in expanding desegregation that they canceled a pending partnership with the school system. Model Cities had been considering funding two afterschool instructional and recreational programs, which would serve mostly black children in the program's partner communities. Dissatisfied with the board's inflexibility on busing, Model Cities Director Sylvester Vaughns ended negotiations with the county and began seeking another partner agency for the program.

The audacity of school and elected officials, and of white parents' "overwhelming opposition to the busing and destruction of county schools"²⁸⁰ intensified blacks' interest in taking legal action against the system. Between August 1970 and February 1972, the board had gone against school district policy and allowed twenty-nine Bladensburg High students without the required criteria to remain at the school anyway instead of transferring to Fairmont Heights High;²⁸¹ rejected a proposal developed by its own administrative staff that would have "achieved substantial integration" by busing 7,352 children between nine majority black schools and thirty-one majority white schools;²⁸² rejected for the third time a

279. Douglas Watson, "Teacher Unit Opposes County School Shifts."

280. Herbert H. Denton, "Pr. George's Votes Integration Study," *Washington Post*, December 31, 1971.

281. Douglas Watson, "29 White Students Win Plea to Remain at Bladensburg," *Washington Post*, August 26, 1970.

282. Douglas Watson, "Integrate or Face Fund Loss."

proposal by Jesse Warr, the only black board member, to establish new and larger attendance zones that would give every school a twenty-two percent black population, matching the black population rate in the county,²⁸³ and approved a plan to open two new junior high schools that each would have ninety percent white enrollment.²⁸⁴

Faced with this culture of resistance to desegregation among the county's education policy makers, eight black parents in Prince George's County filed suit against the county on March 29, 1972, for maintaining a racially segregated public school system, in violation of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. They were represented by the local chapters of the NAACP and the ACLU. The school district's size and proximity to the Nation's Capital helped account for regular and extensive local and national media coverage of the court proceedings, especially pertaining to the large-scale, cross-county busing of students, which was required to meet black-white racial-balance within each school. In the weeks before the filing of the lawsuit, bureaucrats and politicians all over the country were weighing in on the merits and drawbacks of busing children miles outside their neighborhood as a means to desegregate schools. Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, "generally considered a racial moderate," got behind the idea of pushing Congress to call a constitutional convention on busing.

283. Denton, "Pr. George's Votes Integration Study."

284. Herbert H. Denton, "90% White Schools Approved in Count," *Washington Post*, February 25, 1972.

Carter said he would support a one-day, statewide public school boycott if the Georgia House did not join the state Senate in pressing Congress to do so.²⁸⁵

Attempting to ameliorate the nationwide busing debate, President Richard M. Nixon appointed a committee to examine ways around busing as a means to achieve desegregation. HEW Secretary Elliott Richardson, chairing the committee, said a proposed Constitutional amendment to make it unlawful for public schools to use race as a factor in assigning children to schools seemed to further support the *Brown* ruling. Richardson also suggested that such a law would undermine successful school desegregation efforts that had been implemented without busing. Months later, while presiding over the desegregation lawsuit in Prince George's County, Judge Kaufman asserted that county residents' opposition to busing was not based in a knowledge of the facts. "Transportation to school on school buses, at any school level, is not presently the exception," Kaufman said. "Busing is an existing condition for nearly one-half of the entire student population and more than one-third of the elementary school population."²⁸⁶

Sylvester Vaughns, a plaintiff in the Prince George's County parents' lawsuit, had moved in 1966 into the county's Palmer Park subdivision, a historically white neighborhood that was significantly black by 1972. The town's population had begun shifting around 1971, as real estate agents urged white homeowners to sell their

285. Eric Wentworth, "Busing Solution Pressed: HEW Chief Is Opposed to Amendments," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1972.

286. *Washington Post*, "Judge: Segregated System Was Never ... Dismantled."

houses at low prices to avoid property-value losses they claimed would occur as more black families purchased homes in the community.²⁸⁷ A North Carolina native, Vaughns had spent half of his own school days in the classroom and the other half working in cotton fields. His determination in pushing for desegregation was tied directly to his incomplete, segregated education in North Carolina. Vaughns claimed the quality of his son's education at Kentland Junior High in Palmer Park had decreased as the enrollment had become predominantly black. After filing the law suit in March, he told *Washington Post* reporter Philip McCombs that he thought segregation had "a psychological effect on children that can never be undone." Recalling how work in the cotton fields had "cheated" him out his education, Vaughns said, "I swore it would never happen to my children. . . . Schools get more when they are desegregated."²⁸⁸

In addition to the broad charge of operating a segregated school system in violation of *Brown*, the eight parents who initiated the lawsuit made a number of other charges against the school board, accusations that succeed in revealing the schools system's willful noncompliance with *Brown*, including: racial discrimination in utilizing, recruiting, promoting and demoting black staff; unequal allocation of resources to racially identifiable schools; maintaining sixty-one percent of black

287. Real estate agents aggressively used this tactic, referred to as "blockbusting." The Fair Housing Act of 1968 had made housing discrimination illegal. On November 25, 1971, the *Washington Post* reported that the Maryland real estate commission had been given the power to stop solicitations "it deemed damaging to the public or to the integrity of the real estate profession."

288. Philip A. McCombs, "Pr. George's Father, Son Sue for Better Schools," *Washington Post*, March 31, 1972.

student enrollment in majority-black schools; and operating a "permissive transfer system under which white students in majority-black schools could transfer to majority-white schools."²⁸⁹ The charges were not only an assertion of the plaintiffs' claim to equal protection and an underscoring of their right, as black citizens, to demand their rights. The specificity of the charges against the system left no doubt that the parents were acknowledging their group's difference – race – and were accusing the board of treating them differently because of their race. They were declaring their right to be black and also be entitled to civil rights, as well as their right to formally object to a withholding of those rights.

As the summer of 1972 progressed, Judge Kaufman ruled that the county's segregated school system had never been “effectively dismantled” and ordered the board of education to develop a desegregation plan by August 22 that “promises realistically to work ... until it is clear that state-imposed segregation has been completely removed,” as the U.S. Supreme Court had stipulated in 1967 in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, Virginia*, a decision that established freedom-of-choice plans as insufficient means of racially unifying school districts.²⁹⁰ Responding to the judge's order, school board members Rodney W. Johnson and A. James Golato on September 12 presented a plan that recommended the closing of seven all-black schools and a moratorium on school construction "in the area of the

289. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *A Long Day's Journey into Light*, 286.

290. *Ibid*, 293.

county between the Capital Beltway and the District of Columbia line, the area of greatest black growth in Prince George's."²⁹¹

By September 26, blacks in the county had coalesced to push back against the Johnson and Golato proposal. At a public meeting that evening, the board was delivered two petitions with six thousand signatures. "The crowd of black parents and school children at yesterday's hearing gave the most dramatic indication to date of black sentiment on the desegregation issue," reporter Herbert H. Denton noted. During the "often emotional" forum, speakers said they resented black children being expected to bear the brunt of busing, even in the interest of furthering desegregation, which many supported. There also was opposition to converting Fairmont Heights High to a performing arts school and its neighbor Bethune Junior High to a science and vocational center, both with voluntary enrollment.²⁹²

John J. Williams, president of the Fairmont Park-Chapel Oaks-North Englewood civic association, delivered a strong reprimand of the Johnson-Golato proposal, saying the plan was "just what is needed to complete the school board's nineteen-year history of continued refusal to comply with the law." He noted the paradox of both Johnson and Golato, known opponents of busing, having become proponents of a plan that would use busing as a "one-way proposition – black only." Speaking for the whole black community, Williams told the board, "No longer will we sit idle and let you destroy our children's educational opportunities, then our

291. Herbert H. Denton, "Blacks Beat Bid to Close Some Schools," *Washington Post*, September 27, 1972.

292. *Ibid.*

schools, and finally, our communities."²⁹³ Accusing board members of complicity in diverting black families' home ownership aspirations, as well, Williams lambasted their overall obstructionism: "I suggest those board members whose conflict of interest is seemingly for housing, to resign and join the Board of Realtors where your plan might be more appreciated," he told them. We have not forgotten it was the Board of Realtors and police organizations who openly opposed the passage of the Human Relations Commission and Fair Housing Bill."²⁹⁴

James L. Gainey, chairman of the Model Neighborhood Action Board, also testified against the Johnson-Golato resolution, saying that the board engages with the county's black community in a paternal matter. "This kind of 'we know what's best for you attitude' is socioeconomic genocide in our community," Gainey told the board members. Articulating the same collective ownership of schools in black communities as white parents articulated about schools in their communities, Gainey told the board "these schools are valuable assets to us, and must be preserved at all costs." Conveying an expectation of fairness from the school board, Gainey told them that "the citizens of the Model Neighborhood Area will support every effort to support equiponderant desegregation planning."²⁹⁵

293. "Statement of Fairmont Park, Chapel Oaks, North Englewood Civic Association Letter to Board of Education" (September 26, 1972), Community Response Box 3, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

294. Ibid.

295. Ibid.

Sylvester Vaughns said Johnson and Golato's true intention in drafting the proposal had been to draw out blacks who also were against further desegregation, a plausible accusation as the two had throughout the year "opposed every move" to further desegregation and abstained from voting on their own proposal at the September public meeting.²⁹⁶ At the time of the NAACP lawsuit filing six months earlier, a little more than sixty percent of black students still were attending schools with enrollments that were more than fifty percent black, and more than sixty-six percent of white students were attending schools that were more than ninety percent white.²⁹⁷

On December 20, 1972, a group of black parents met with school officials to press for answers on the proposed closing of Fairmount Heights Elementary. A leaky radiator and undependable boiler were among the problems that led the school board to declare the thirty-seven-year-old building substandard and to close it. Parents and the principal had lobbied the school board to address the issues, but the school received only assurances of repairs, not actual repairs, even when children sat in unhealthy and unsanitary conditions. Among six schools that had been declared substandard the previous year, three were for black students and three were for white students. By the time of the December meeting, the three white schools had been removed from the substandard list and made operational. The school board shamelessly, it seemed, explained that the repairs had been made at those schools "to

296. Denton, "Blacks Beat Bid to Close Some Schools."

297. Denton, "NAACP Sues County, Asks More Desegregation."

minimize the increase in transfers and minimize busing" related to desegregation, the *Washington Post* reported the day after the Fairmount Heights Elementary meeting.²⁹⁸ County officials' blatant disregard for the educational rights of black children prompted some black parents to ask "whether the county school system decided that some black schools are substandard and should be closed... only when it became clear that white students would be transferred into them" through the desegregation plan.²⁹⁹ The board's irresponsible and unaccountable management also might have been a reminder of the indignation and impatience that had fueled Marshall's crusade against segregation in America's public schools. The bold response of this school's black parents, if nothing else, cast a moral scrutiny over the preferential and prejudicial actions of county leaders. Further, their response was an unabashed assertion of their racial identity in the face of school officials' attempts to deny racial motivations in their decision making.

After nine months of hearings, stern judicial orders, and contentious public meetings, the county school board failed to draft a desegregation plan that was in compliance with *Brown*, the subsequent federal court rulings, or the standards established by the federal government. On December 29, 1972, a fed-up Judge Kaufman ordered the Prince George's County school district to activate one of four proposals it had submitted for review earlier that month. First noting that one of the

298. Herbert H. Denton, "Plan to Shut 3 Black Schools Stirs Prince George's Protest," *Washington Post*, December 21, 1972.

299. *Ibid.*

four proposals "was based on the same freedom of choice principles that had failed ... in the past," Kaufman then went on to commend "the efforts and accomplishments" of the "school board staff members who, as professionals," did what the board itself had not done, "demonstrate[ed] the willingness and the ability under time pressure to produce a constitutional plan."³⁰⁰

The approved desegregation plan was to be activated January 29, 1973, the middle of the school year. It exempted high school seniors from the transfers until the following school year. The plan called for a decrease in the number of schools that were overwhelmingly black or overwhelmingly white from 162 to 11 and the transporting by school bus of 8,572 black students and 4,705 white students who had previously walked to school. It ensured a black-student population within each school that would be at least ten percent and at most fifty percent of the total number of students within the school. Addressing anti-busing activists, Kaufman clarified that "in Prince George's County, transportation to school on school buses is not presently, at any school level, the exception. Rather, busing is an existing condition for nearly one-half of the entire student population and more than one-third of the elementary school population."³⁰¹

County officials had been brash in exposing their anti-desegregation intentions, emboldened not only by southern tradition but, perhaps, also by the 1972 candidacy of George Wallace. Two months before Judge Kaufman's busing order

300. "Judge: Segregated System Was Never Dismantled, *Washington Post*," December 30, 1972.

301. *Ibid.*

went into effect, Democratic presidential candidates George McGovern and Hubert Humphrey had split the majority of their party's votes in Maryland, which gave the state's presidential primary victory to Wallace, the candidate who had made a litany out of the word "segregation." Wallace also won Prince George's County, whose county executive, William W. Gullett, was Republican.

Without community pressure, litigation, and judicial intervention, black communities in the county that were determined to gain educational justice might have had to wait even longer for a thorough shake-up of the status quo in the county.³⁰²

302. John T. Willis, *Presidential Elections in Maryland* (Mt. Airy, Md: Lomond Publications, 1984): 214-215.

Chapter 13: "Why Did You Tell Them We Were Human?"

When busing went into effect in January 2003, black students in Prince George's County had varied expectations and reservations. Decades later, they recalled their experiences, which had both affirmed and expanded their racial attitudes. Although conflict erupted between black and white students at some Prince George's County County schools, dissension also arose among blacks, a dimension of the desegregation struggle that other historians have rarely noted. Here, I suggest that the conflict among black teens from different neighborhoods at one high school was less about class differences than about the divergent senses of belonging or fitting in within a majority-white school, occasioned by the length of time each group had been attending the particular desegregated school.

On December 19, 1972, a *Washington Post* reporter stopped by Central High in Capital Heights to put together a story for the next day's paper that involved desegregation, a boycott, anticipation, and fear. Central's white-student enrollment was eight percent. In the mid-1960s, the school had been predominantly white, before desegregation increased the number of black students there, and before whites began to move out of the school's attendance zone. That morning, a student boycott protesting the January desegregation order was in effect, pushed forward by a white senior at Parkdale High and a white Lanham parent who was a leading anti-busing activist. About 8,000 of the district's 68,000 junior high and senior high school students, most in the north-county region, had not shown up for classes. Parkdale High registered a fifty-five percent absentee rate and Bladensburg Junior High fifty percent, well above the district's daily absentee rate of ten to fifteen percent, while

absences at Central High, Fairmont Heights High, and the other predominantly black schools closer to the city averaged only about ten percent above the average rate.

Some Central students were in classes, some skipping classes and hanging out in the cafeteria and hallways, and still others were gathered in the school library. A student who was in the cafeteria spotted the reporter and called out to him, encouraging him to interview "not just the 'A' students in the library about busing" but to also "talk to some 'B' and 'C' and 'D' students here." The reporter interviewed both groups.³⁰³

Speaking in terms of "we," "they," "whitey," and being "outnumbered," the students were anxious about the transfers that would begin in about one month. They worried over a number of things: doing well enough to keep up with the white students, fights, their school's reputation for violence following them to the new school, whether the library would have books by black writers and a black studies class, and whether high school was too late for desegregating students. The student council leader told the group gathered in the library that he had been in meetings with white students from other schools who seemed to be afraid of the Central students. "Why didn't you tell them we were human?" a girl asked him. "I did." he said. "I told them we don't bite."³⁰⁴

Students' fears were grounded in more than just new-school jitters. The anti-busing campaigns in the county had been aggressive and filled with racist rhetoric. In

303. Herbert H. Denton, "Blacks Fret Over Transfers to White Schools," *Washington Post*, December 20, 1972.

304. *Ibid.*

the month leading up to the transfer day, January 29, 1973, Conrad Briggs had gone with his parents to a meeting at his new school, Beltsville Junior High. It had been organized to ensure a smooth transition for the incoming students from Thomas Johnson Junior High. Conrad recalled that the meeting "looked like something out of a movie."

People are jumping to their feet and saying, 'Niggers in my school are going to make it dangerous for my daughter!' Black and white parents sitting on opposite sides of the room. Blacks seething and occasionally responding, ... We don't want to come up here either, we don't want our kids an extra ten to fifteen more miles from home.' ...

My dad, several fathers, followed us, took time off work and escorted the school buses and watched us go in and made sure we were safe, and did that for the first two or three days. Once we got there, there were white people at Beltsville who were just like many of the white people at Thomas Johnson: 'Hey, we're glad you're here. Don't worry about all the craziness. School is school. I'm a professional, you're a kid, we're going to do the school thing!' ³⁰⁵

Having completed five uneasy months at Beltsville Junior High, Conrad in September 1973 moved on to tenth grade at DuVal High. Reuniting with the Thomas Johnson classmates from whom he had been separated the previous January and making new friends, black and white, Conrad's tenure in high school was the vision Thurgood Marshall must have imagined, and his views on racial relations became more analytical: "I didn't know that white people weren't all the same. We thought they were all the same, socioeconomically. What I knew [afterward] was that we're not that different. ... The people living in any particular neighborhood or the neighborhoods that fed DuVal, were essentially living the same lives."

305. Briggs.

At seven years old and in second grade, Barrett Matthews' world was small and uncomplicated. He had attended kindergarten and first grade at Glenarden Woods Elementary, where his kindergarten teacher had been among the first white faculty members. He could stand in his front yard and see his school; his first-grade teacher lived three doors down and across the street; and his two best friends lived up the street. On January 29, he rode a bus to school for the first time, transferred to Whitehall Elementary in the predominantly white community of Bowie as part of the school district's court-ordered desegregation plan.³⁰⁶

As he was heading to Whitehall, his Glenarden Woods classmates throughout the community were boarding school buses headed to other schools in other neighborhoods, the result of the cross-county busing plan. His two best friends and several other neighbors a street or two over from his also had been assigned to Whitehall. That he had two friends on his street going to the same school, Barrett said, "was the thing that mattered the most to me. Otherwise, it would have felt isolating."

Even though he did not experience isolation, attending Whitehall was not a color-blind experience either: "We were old enough to know black and white" and were "definitely" aware that there weren't many other black people at the school, Barrett said. "That's why many of the fights started in the beginning," because of name calling and territory claiming, he recalled.

306. Barrett Matthews.

It was the teachers who were "the peacemakers," he remembered. "They were just trying to make us feel comfortable there." On the first day of school, the students in his class gave him a welcome letter they had written, which his mother still has. The physical education teacher, a white man, made a particular effort to mitigate socio-cultural differences among the black and white students and try to establish some common ground. "Mr. Herman decided that since many of us boys [from Glenarden] played football and the white kids played soccer, he would teach all of us rugby!" Barrett recalled³⁰⁷

While it was expected that the desegregation of schools would generate tension and confrontations between black and white students, discord among black students from different neighborhoods might not have been anticipated. However, hostility among blacks did manifest. Recalling the experience of leaving the Lakeland community in the early 1970s to attend Greenbelt Junior High, about two miles from Lakeland, Maxine Gross said it was at first easy because she still was with her lifelong friends and neighbors. "You knew the same people, you knew their mother and their father, you had that sense of community," she recalled.³⁰⁸

In January 1973 when court-ordered busing went into effect, Maxine and her twin sister, Delphine, were in eighth grade and their second year at Greenbelt Junior High. The county's desegregation plan would bring to the school almost five hundred new black students from three junior high schools in the county's central corridor, ten

307. Maxine Gross.

308. Ibid.

miles south and east of Greenbelt. Thinking back to the midyear enrollment of the new black students and her perception of the effect they had on the school, Maxine describes an environment that went from "not particularly hospitable" to intimidating: "These [new] students would physically fight the teachers. ... The teachers seemed like they were scared to death." It caught her by surprise. "We did not have that sense in Lakeland, that you were going to go to school and cut up. There was a lot of discussion ... that the kids from Lakeland were different, that we weren't 'as black,'" Maxine recalled. She said taunts of "acting white" were not infrequent. "You ended up not knowing what you were. You were neither black enough nor white enough."³⁰⁹

What was the source of the antagonism between the black students from Lakeland and the new black students? Did desegregation create the situation for this hostility? Had Maxine met her new classmates in an all-black school would there have been the same lack of accord among them? Were studiousness and pursuit of academic success, endeavors that have commonly been labeled as acting white, triggers for the other students' taunts?

309. Maxine Gross.

Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu in a 1986 *Urban Review* article, "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden' of 'Acting White,'" described a "cultural orientation" within the black community that "defines academic learning in school as 'acting white' and success as the prerogative of white Americans." Fordham and Ogbu theorized that "this orientation embodies both social pressures against striving for academic success and fear of striving for academic success." It developed out of white Americans' denial of black intellect and achievement, and black Americans' acceptance and internalizing of these supposed deficiencies. In mocking their black friends' academic pursuits, black students were, perhaps unconsciously, discouraging their peers from adopting a behavior that was "white people's prerogative."

Accusing their black classmates of acting white was a way of affirming their own racial and cultural identity, an acknowledgement, as DuBois noted, that they did not want to "cease to be Negroes and become white in action and thought ... to take on the culture of white Americans, doing what they do and thinking what they think."³¹⁰ In the environment in which they were placed – new, distant from home, white-dominated – such self-validation was necessary.

Yet, were the black children from Lakeland and Palmer Park so different? There is no evidence to suggest that Lakeland parents had grounded their children in codes of conduct that Palmer Park parents had not. I suggest that the conduct among the black students who were bused to Greenbelt Junior High in 1973 as a result of the court order also manifested the stigma that was attached to busing, but specifically, the busing of black children into white communities. The fundamental basis for this stigma, held by some blacks and whites, was the assumption at the time of *Brown* and for the next two decades that remediating the quality of black children's education – more essential than racial mixing for some blacks – justified dislocating them to white schools. From the perspective of school district leaders and many white parents, black students wanted the instruction, resources, and facilities available only in the white schools. Black schools were perceived as having no value for white students, and white spaces were projected as having inherent value. Black students relocated to

310. Robert G. Newby, "Desegregation: Its Inequities and Paradoxes," *The Black Scholar* 11, no. 1 (September-October 1979): 24, accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/stable/pdf/41066509.pdf>

those white spaces were seen as beneficiaries of white largesse, while the busing of white students was viewed as an aberration.

The social distance between the newly arrived black students and the Lakeland students also can be explained by the fact that Lakeland students had been desegregated to Greenbelt Junior High in the fall of 1964, when the county had rezoned them from Bethune Junior High. By January 1973, Lakeland children had an established presence at Greenbelt Junior High, which was not the case for the new black students bused from the central-county neighborhoods. If those factors were not enough to complicate the possibility of their seamless integration and socialization at Greenbelt Junior, there was the fact that they were transferred from three different junior high schools – 208 from Maryland Park, 194 from Thomas Pullen, and 80 from Bethune. One group's ride to school covered about ten miles, while the other two groups rode about seven miles.³¹¹ About 417 white Greenbelt students had been transferred to Bethune Junior High.

Although neither Maxine Gross nor any other student was likely to draw this conclusion at the time, their classmates' disruptive and anti-social conduct, or behaviors perceived to be so, were a manifestation of their sense of not belonging.

311. "Prince George's School Affected by Busing," *Washington Post*, December 23, 1972.

A plan for school re-assignments had been released to the public a few weeks earlier, but Judge Kaufman had "ordered school officials to revise their plans several times," according to a report by Herbert Denton, "County Unveils Bus Plan," in the *Washington Post* on December 22. At least one source, the Greenbelt New Review of December 28, 1972, reported that all 482 new enrollees at Greenbelt Junior High were transferring from Bethune Junior High. The breakdown in the Post shows the 482 students were transferring from these three junior highs.

Political scientist William E. Nelson concluded that when black students were desegregated into white schools their exclusion from the school's "social and governmental network" culminated in "an immense loss" for the black student. According to Nelson, "in the desegregated school, the black student must subordinate his sense of group identity and school spirit and accept the preferences of the white majority. ... In this environment, black students frequently develop feelings of not belonging to the school and strike back through acts of rebellion."³¹²

Even though they were not new to Greenbelt Junior High, Lakeland students in the late 1960s had mixed experiences with race while there. Benay Gray Hawkins said she doesn't "remember feeling tension from teachers or anything" while at Greenbelt from 1966 to 1969. "We went to their dances. ... I liked the classes. I don't remember any teacher saying anything they shouldn't have said," Benay recalled. Years later though, conversations with her Lakeland friends over the years convinced her that some of them "would say they felt the racism" while at Greenbelt.³¹³

I contend that the chaotic nature of the midyear transfer, as well as the angry and bitter atmosphere in which desegregation was taking place in the county, compounded an experience that already would have been, at best, overwhelming, confusing, and uneasy for black students who came to Greenbelt as a result of the

312. William E. Nelson Jr., "School Desegregation and the Black Community," *Theory into Practice* 26, Educational Perspectives Then and Now (December 1988): 454, accessed May 12, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/stable/1476266>

313. Gray Hawkins.

federal court order. While it could be argued that Lakeland children, who were part of a generations-old black community with a documented commitment to public education, prioritized conventional discipline in school while the families of the black children who were new to Greenbelt Jr. High did not, my research found no evidence to support that notion.

What can be evidenced nearly two decades after *Brown* is that black parents throughout the county had an understanding of both the benefits and the possible harm of desegregation, and desegregation activism was in force over those two decades. In the central-county neighborhood of Palmer Park, a 1950s white subdivision that in the mid-1960s drew many black families moving from Washington, D.C. – who pushed out the white families – civic and political engagement was strong. Palmer Park resident Sylvester Vaughns chaired the county's Model Cities Advisory Board, and would become a lead litigant in the 1972 lawsuit challenging the county's desegregation policies. Another Palmer Park parent, concerned in 1972 that new desegregation plans would require her two daughters to walk across a busy highway to a new school, said she didn't know if blacks "want to be integrated so much as we want equal resources. I don't think we want to be next to them any more than they want to be next to us."³¹⁴

A black social studies teacher at Parkdale High in 1974 took another view of desegregation, at least as it related to black children in Lakeland, Maxine Gross

314. Herbert H. Denton and Philip A. McCombs, "New Junior High: An Emotional Issue: Lines Drawn in Pr. George's Junior High Desegregation," *Washington Post*, January 11, 1972.

remembered: "He said we were all from the plantation, [referring] to Lakeland as the plantation." At the time, she thought he was calling them slaves. "Saying it to a bunch of teenagers was probably not a good choice," but, she says, "in a way, it was kind of true, in that Lakeland was in a lot of ways dependent upon the University of Maryland for sustenance. But that's not necessarily a bad thing."³¹⁵

On January 30, 1973, two days after court-ordered, countywide busing got under way, the Prince George's County delegates in the Maryland General Assembly passed a bill that proposed replacing the county's governor-appointed school board with an elected board. The only dissenting representative was Arthur King, son of Hester King, the leader of the county's NAACP through the early 1960s. King's opposition to the bill was based in a reasonable fear that "candidates articulating the most extreme anti-busing sentiments," supported by groups who wanted to remove the school board members they blamed for court-ordered busing, would overwhelmingly win a countywide election and return segregation to the schools.³¹⁶ "People are being misled into thinking they can solve the desegregation issue by having an elected school board," King had said when the bill was introduced.³¹⁷

Despite his efforts and as he had feared, county voters on November 6, 1973, elected six school board members who were supported by the anti-busing group

315. Maxine Gross.

316. Cohen.

317. Edward Walsh and Philip McCombs, "Pr. George's Delegates Approve Bill to Elect County School Board," *Washington Post*, January 31, 1973.

Citizens for Community Schools. Ruth Wolf, the white, pro-desegregation incumbent from Cheverly, lost in the election. Many voters in the predominantly white town, including former schools superintendent William S. Schmidt, had vocally opposed desegregation and, in the case of Schmidt, had impeded it by supporting segregationist policies. Jesse J. Warr remained the only black member on the school board, his victory enabled by a bill out of the state legislature that established at-large school board districts in Prince George's and that aligned election districts with legislative districts, which ensured a majority-black election district in the communities near Fairmont Heights High School.³¹⁸ They had engaged in a steady and persistent fight, but blacks in the county had not surmounted conventional racial prejudice and discrimination.

As HEW and pro-desegregation factions pushed to increase desegregation in all county schools, white families began to withdraw their children from the schools. Over two years, from 1970 to 1972, the county registered a decrease of 7,300 white students. From the fall of 1972, when the court issued its desegregation order, to the fall of 1973, eight months after the order went into effect, more than 11,000 white students left county schools, and nearly 6,000 withdrew between the fall of 1973 and the fall of 1974. During the same period, black-student enrollment, on the increase since the 1960s, further increased by 5,591.³¹⁹

318. Cohen.

319. "Lawrence Feinberg, "Percentage of Blacks in Prince George's Rises," *Washington Post*, January 26, 1975.

Chapter 14: Beyond 1974

The departure of white Prince George's County families opposed to busing created within a few years after the 1972 court order a black-student majority in the county school system. Dividing along income and class lines, some blacks debated whether busing still was necessary while others argued that prejudice and discrimination among blacks, based on income status, had replaced racial discrimination. Similar to Prince George's County's, Atlanta, Georgia, by 1980 also had experienced a population shift to majority black, with the fear of desegregated city schools having pushed whites out of the central city in the 1970s. However, Atlanta never attempted a massive busing program, making Prince George's County's desegregation history unique among the most studied school desegregation stories.³²⁰ Further, in Prince George's County, busing had led to school desegregation moving from being an interracial conflict to an entanglement of differences among black people.

320. "Atlanta in the Civil Rights Movement," Atlanta Regional Council for Higher Education, October 16, 2017,

http://www.atlantahighered.org/civilrights/essay_detail.asp?phase=3.

Following a 1959 court order to desegregate Atlanta's public schools, the Georgia governor appointed an influential white businessman to facilitate the planning. His subsequent recommendations included, among other things, providing grants to students who found themselves in desegregated schools and wanted to transfer. When the state ended de jure segregation in 1961, de facto segregation persisted. Yet, the cadre of black college students who came to the city in the 1960s brought with them a civil rights impetus. Negotiating with the city in the 1970s for further desegregation, they agreed to the hiring of a black superintendent of city schools in exchange for limiting their busing goals. Whites were leaving Atlanta though and more blacks were arriving, rendering a two-thirds black majority in the city by 1980, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's report on Population Totals by Race, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/GAtab.pdf>.

On November 8, 1975, a story in the *Afro-American* reported that Prince George's County could face more busing. "Schools that had black-white student ratios acceptable to the court in 1973 had reverted to ratios the court had outlawed in the lawsuit. The percentage of blacks living in the county grew from 8 percent to 37 percent between 1960 and 1980.³²¹ From 1970 to 1980, black student enrollment climbed from 31,994 to 60,793, as white student enrollment dropped by more than half, from 127,798 to 56,031.³²² These dramatic shifts made it impossible to maintain the court-ordered ten percent minimum and fifty percent maximum black-student representation within each school. Yet, another dynamic would exacerbate desegregation efforts in a way that might have been predicted but was not.

Toward the end of the 1970s, class fissures became evident within Prince George's black communities, as families with increasing income were integrating historically white neighborhoods that had consistently well-resourced schools. These wealthier black families pushed the school board to stop busing their children out of their integrated communities, thus overtly undermining the possibility of a unified educational agenda among blacks and leading to a redefining of desegregation. The new contingent organized its opposition in the form of Blacks Against Unnecessary Busing. In 1979, increasing disagreement over the direction of school desegregation and busing led then-NAACP president William Martin to meet secretly with school

321. Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, "Emerging Trends: The Many Faces of Prince George's County," 7.

322. Lawrence Feinberg, "Black Students in Suburbs Top City Enrollment," *Washington Post*, December 14, 1980.

board chairman Norman Saunders, and board attorney Paul Nussbaum to make revisions to the 1972 court order, without the knowledge of the rest of the school board members, nor authorization of NAACP national headquarters. Martin's plan would have allowed black children in some middle-class, integrated neighborhoods, such as his, to attend schools within or closer to those neighborhoods. The plan ran into several problems. Other local NAACP members informed the national office of Martin's move, and he was permanently suspended from the organization. As imagined or realized through *Brown*, school desegregation was a mechanism to ensure black children could freely access and were equitably educated in the nation's public schools. In Prince George's, a faction of black leadership was demonstrating that they considered educational equity a premium only for children whose parents could afford to supplement their neighborhood school with more than the basic resources.

In 1981, NAACP officials claimed that the black-white student ratio at a number of county schools was out of compliance with the court-ordered standard set in 1972: black student enrollment was not to fall below ten percent nor exceed fifty percent. With more blacks having moved into the county since 1973 and many whites having moved out, black enrollment at more than half of county schools exceeded fifty percent, and at some schools reached seventy percent.³²³ NAACP leaders asked Judge Kaufman to reopen the 1972 desegregation case.

323. Margaret Shapiro and Leonard Wynter, "Pr. George's Faces Busing Case Renewal," *Washington Post*, September 2, 1981.

Ruling on his review of the situation in 1983, Kaufman determined that the county school system had retained "vestiges of segregation" and ordered the convening of a citizens panel to remediate the district's compliance problems and make recommendations for remedy. The board appealed Kaufman's decision, but two years later, in March 1985, an appeals court agreed with Kaufman. Two weeks after that, the report of the citizens panel created an even bigger stir than the loss of the appeal. The panel's recommendations amounted to the busing of more students, black and white; longer bus rides; and the closing of thirty-two schools, nearly half of them in black neighborhoods. The recommendations did not convey the mood of the community. As political scientist Alvin Thornton and educator Eva Wells Chunn would later point out in their discussion of one-race magnet schools, black county residents "had grown tired of schools closing in their communities and resented that their children bore the primary burden of busing." Even more significant, black families had no evidence desegregation was enabling academic gains.³²⁴

The school district did not adopt the recommendations of the citizens panel but agreed with the NAACP on a new strategy for desegregating the schools: establishing special-interest "magnet" programs in focused curricula, such as math, arts, and foreign language, to draw white students to schools in black communities. Magnet-based desegregation also would include a component, the Milliken II Program, that would allow the district to maintain one-race schools in neighborhoods where there was a "concentration of certain schools with black student enrollments

324. Alvin Thornton and Eva Wells Chunn, "Desegregating with Magnet and One-Race Elementary and Secondary Schools," *Urban League Review* 11, no. 1-2 (Summer-Winter 1987-88, 1988): 140.

over eighty percent." Those schools would receive "compensatory and remedial programs and equipment."³²⁵ The new plan was slated to begin in the 1985-86 school year.

As it was being developed, an ad hoc committee of local black organizational and political leaders suggested the school district set a different goal -- "desegregation to achieve high-quality education rather than to achieve desegregation," and to do "what was required to make education work for black students, regardless of the racial composition of the schools they attended."³²⁶ Organized as the Ad Hoc Committee to Achieve Quality Education in Prince George's County, this group of black leaders made additional recommendations to the school board regarding the interests of black students and employees, including increasing the number of black school administrators and equalizing the allocation of resources among black-majority and white-majority schools.

Public education is highly vulnerable to political interests, and in the 1990s, Prince George's County's political leadership was black. Alvin Thornton, a black Alabama native, Howard University political science professor, and county resident won a seat on the school board in 1992. Curry, a Maryland-trained attorney who had attended the county's elementary, junior high, and high schools, was elected county executive in 1994. Thornton's and Curry's efforts, though not always aligned, enabled

325. Ibid, 153.

326. Ibid.

the end of court-mandated, racial quota-based school assignments,³²⁷ a relief to black Prince Georgians frustrated with the transporting of children away from majority-black schools near their neighborhoods to majority-black schools in other neighborhoods.

Presenting to the NAACP the board's rationale for ending busing in 1996-97, the school district said it was finally able to give the leaders of the organization "what they really wanted: good schools and equality in education."³²⁸ As County Executive Wayne Curry was winding down his first term in office in 1998, a federal court ended twenty-six years of mandatory busing, and school district leaders committed to returning children to neighborhood schools, constructing and refurbishing, buildings, and increasing academic outcomes. In 2002, with some of the plans still in development and black students comprising seventy-seven percent of the district's 134,000 total enrollment, the court lifted the original desegregation order, declaring the school system to be in unitary status; but it continued to hold the district accountable for following through on the goals set in 1998.³²⁹ The order ended the intensive thirty-year desegregation effort, which journalist Lisa Frazier noted had

327. Retha Hill, "P.G. Schools Want to End Racial Busing," *Washington Post*, July 21, 1994.

328. Ibid.

329. Nancy Trejos, "School Desegregation Suit Dismissed in Prince George's," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2002; Paul Schwartzman, "Curry Wants Legacy of 26 New Schools," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2001.

never succeeded as a "panacea for a quality education for African-American students in Prince George's County."³³⁰

The largely unified, community-based, black political force that had advocated for just and fair desegregation policies from the 1950s to the early 1970s was grounded in civil rights movement ideals: state-protected exercise of constitutional rights, as well as equal and equitable provision of public-funded services, including public education. In the 1990s, the county's top political leadership was set on building "an enclave of black prosperity," as county schools dealt with achievement gaps, management, and funding problems, as well as a lack of engagement by the "economic and political elites with the education of its children."³³¹ As political scientist Valerie Johnson theorized in her study of the wielding political power among suburban blacks, in the now majority black Prince George's County, the interests of the whole group had become subordinate to the particular interests of a segment of the population.³³²

Charles James, a 1975 graduate of DuVal High and 1979 graduate of Georgia Institute of Technology, suggests that desegregation enabled divisions and breaks within black communities through a process of pushing out, dividing, and isolating:

In segregation, the drug addict was in the neighborhood, the teacher was, the preacher, everybody was in there together. But once people started getting money and integration came, black people that had something could go live

330. Lisa Frazier, "Judge Ends Busing in Prince George's," *Washington Post*, September 2, 1998.

331. Ovetta Wiggins, "Wayne K. Curry Dies at 63," *Washington Post*, July 2, 2014; "Wanted: Ways to Change the System," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2002.

332. Johnson, *Black Power in the Suburbs*, 11.

wherever they wanted ... and so now all those neighborhoods were just left with the people who couldn't get out. And their whole experience is completely different.³³³

James' theory is somewhat supported by the *New York Times*' 2002 depiction of Prince George's County's evolution as the nation's black suburban utopia.

333. James.

Conclusion

This study joins other twenty-first-century scholars in questioning how African Americans interpreted school desegregation during the first few decades following the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Examining the meanings of school desegregation among African Americans in Prince George's County, Maryland, from 1954 to 1974, I have argued that individuals, families, communities, and organized groups actively and consistently advocated for policies that would ensure black children received instruction, services, and resources that were equal to and equitable with white children's schooling. While optimistic about the opportunities and access desegregation could afford their children, black families, communities, students, and educators also appreciated the benefits of segregated schooling, including the awareness that black children were physically safer within their own communities and that their black teachers were more empathetic of cultural attitudes and behaviors.

Blacks assessed the county's school desegregation policies as being based in preconceived notions of the inferiority of black schools and communities. Such notions imposed inequities and undue burdens upon blacks, who throughout the period endured the withholding of instructional resources, the closing of schools in their neighborhoods, longer travel distances between their homes and their schools, and the physical neglect of their school buildings. These inequities were grounded in the racial ethics of school board members, and as such, prompted blacks to proudly affirm their racial identity, as well as affirm the value of their communities and schools.

Fought and won on Thurgood Marshall's commitment to ensuring the equal rights of black children and enabling a more racially integrated society, the *Brown v. Board of Education* victory was a stimulus for equality in American public education. The Supreme Court's eradication of the separate-but-equal statute, its declaration that "separate is inherently unequal," inspired black individuals and organizations, especially the NAACP, to launch and sustain a decades-long campaign to end racial separation in the nation's public schools. Their work was driven by the presumption that desegregation would place black children at the same starting point as white children in their education, and would guarantee their unobstructed access to the equal facilities and resources. However, despite the legal impetus of *Brown* and of Marshall's abiding belief in it, local school districts freely interpreted the ruling and obstructed desegregation, while the federal government interpreted the ruling as justification for extinguishing black schools.

Black communities had not waited until 1954 to pursue learning and endorse the idea of public education. Schools for black children operated even during slavery. In the succeeding decades, schools were built, black teachers were trained, and classes were held with funding from the government, service organizations, philanthropists, and their own communities. Midway through the twentieth century, the *Brown* ruling compelled them to weigh the practical, social, and cultural advantages of their segregated schools against the advantages and disadvantages their children might find in desegregated schools.

In Prince George's, the freedom-of-choice desegregation policy demonstrated that white county leaders had interpreted *Brown* as a flexible mandate and intended to

apply it selectively. Some black families in Prince George's readily applied to enroll their children in integrated schools through the policy, but a school board member who spoke with the Civil Rights Commission for its 1976 report on the county's desegregation program said freedom of choice had rendered "only token desegregation." However, with the nation's highest court having rendered a ruling that clearly reflected empathy for the educational rights of black children, black communities thought *Brown* also would compel their local school boards toward fair, equal, and nondiscriminatory practices, though not necessarily desegregation – and certainly not forced desegregation.

A key impetus for black parents' push for desegregation in the immediate years after *Brown* was the inconvenience of their children traveling upwards of thirty miles round-trip daily to attend schools designated for black children only, when they lived closer – in some cases, within walking distance – of schools designated for white children only. The school district's neglect of maintenance and repair at schools for black children provided further motivation for black parents to push for their children's integration into better maintained white schools. The disregard for black children was insidiously demeaning. "We were getting second-hand equipment at Fairmont Heights, the helmets, the pads," Fred Jennings recalled. In my senior year, I remember we got new shoulder pads. I thought I was a pro football player! Never knew that the white schools, they'd get a change of equipment every year," Fred said.³³⁴

334. Jennings.

The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's compulsory intervention into Prince George's County's school desegregation planning in the late 1960s revealed that the government gave no more thought to the possible educational value of black schools than county leaders did. Policy makers at every level of government ignored or failed to regard the historical network of black communities and black schools, or to consider the educational, economic, or social consequences of abandoning those schools. Neither the federal government nor the school district demonstrated concern for the pedagogical or psychological affects on black children of shutting down their schools, nor of replacing most of their black teachers with white teachers. Black communities generally supported their schools. Faced with the challenge of desegregating county schools, parents, teachers, students, and black county residents advocated to keep them open and well resourced to preserve the socio-cultural value of their schools. Repeatedly presented with desegregation plans that disproportionately impacted their children, families, and communities, they called for fair and inclusive planning; equal and fair representation; and equal resources, facilities, and services. At the September 26, 1972, public hearing on the Johnson-Golato Resolution, James L. Gainey of the Model Neighborhood Action Board conveyed the frustration and sense of insult some blacks were feeling, but also affirmed their pride: "We will not sit idly by scratching our heads and shuffling our feet to the music of this educational larceny," Gainey said. These schools are valuable assets to us and must be preserved at all costs."³³⁵

335. "Statement of Fairmont Park, Chapel Oaks, North Englewood Civic Association Letter to Board of Education" (September 26, 1972), Community Response Box 3, Folder 1, Ruth S. Wolf Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

Within the context of black Prince Georgians' history in America, black schools contributed significantly. Black activism for education equality during the twenty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* was an affirmation of the pride blacks had in their schools and communities, as well as an insistence on equality for their children. Still, viewpoints on desegregation among black county residents were not consistent or static. Within the first decade of the *Brown* ruling, families acted independently to enroll their children in white schools: Bull Curry and Dervey Lomax took legal action against the school system, and Willie Thomas' parents used the freedom-of-choice option to apply for his transfer to a white school. However, some black parents placed priority on advocating for improved conditions and equal resources at the black schools in the neighborhoods. With petitions, letter writing, and testimony at board meetings, black civic associations began to lobby collectively for a coordinated desegregation plan throughout the county. Many black parents were moved to support desegregation based not only on the civil basis of the issue, but also on its moral rightness. Some adults' own negative experiences within de facto segregation and their concerns for their children's immediate safety caused them to view desegregation with more skepticism and anxiety than optimism. Even parents and teachers who supported desegregation worried that hostile attitudes within white communities, including among white students and white teachers, would project onto their children and undermine their confidence and abilities. Blacks knew desegregation was intended to be a civil advantage, so they went into it more hopeful than skeptical, willing to self-advocate, and finding ways to incorporate social

progress into their lives and balance it with tradition, community, and their children's well being.

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Interviews

Informal conversations with many people helped direct my inquiry and research. The interview subjects quoted in the thesis are listed below, along with the year they graduated from or the years they were enrolled in Prince George's County Public Schools.

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 Maxine Jennings Gray, 1954
 Fred Jennings, 1965
 Sandra White Minor, student, 1971
 Benay Gray Hawkins, student, 1959-1972
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