

**A HISTORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION IN  
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY, 1840-1956**

by

S. Seabrook Jones

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

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LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY, 1840-1956**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines African-American public school education in Louisville, Kentucky, beginning with the free black community's creation of private schools for their children in the 1840s and concluding with the desegregation of the city's public schools in 1956. Throughout this period, the local black community's primary obstacle in securing improvements to black education in Louisville was the local white community's belief in the superiority of their city's black schools relative to public schools for African-Americans elsewhere in Kentucky and the rest of the South.

The comparative strength of Louisville's public schools for black students was demonstrable. As discussed in chapters two and three, my research found that the Board of Education of Louisville spent more money on their black schools than almost anywhere in the South. These schools had an entirely African-American faculty led by black administrators. This faculty also enjoyed wages seven times higher than those paid to black teachers elsewhere in Kentucky. Over the years, the Board built a number of fine facilities for African-American schools. However, while Louisville whites prided themselves of these facts, the local black community fought a continuous battle to achieve equality for their children with what the city's white children received.

My historical analysis shows how throughout the existence of separate schools for African-American children in Louisville, black citizens' ability to exert influence over local politics directly correlated with their ability to affect change for black

public schools. This accounts for the school board providing the same curriculum for white and black elementary schools and allocating white citizens' taxes to help pay for black public schools from the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment through a restructuring of school board elections in 1910 that rendered the black vote nearly obsolete. As examined in chapters four and five, once the black community's political influence over the Board of Education waned, dramatic fissures in spending and curriculum emerged between white and black schools at all levels. Fortunately, national party shifts led to a revival of black political relevance in Louisville as Republicans fought to keep the loyalty of black voters who had begun absconding for the Democratic Party in the 1930s. Chapter six observes how Louisville's African-American citizens used this opportunity to force the Board of Education to include black school facilities in their bond issues and, most impressively, to equalize black and white teachers' salaries in the final years of the Great Depression.

The seventh and concluding chapter of this study examines the 1956 desegregation of public schools in Louisville. Although nationally heralded by the press and politicians as a success, my research highlights the limits of this desegregation. The few white students in formerly black institutions and the Board of Education's resistance to faculty desegregation served as indicators that the Board's primary concern was not achieving racially-equitable schools, but was instead creating a desegregation plan palatable to the city's white citizens.

This dissertation is the first comprehensive exploration of the history of African-American public school education in Louisville, Kentucky, prior to desegregation.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The famous gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson called Louisville, Kentucky “a northern city with southern problems.” Known as “The Gateway to the South”, Louisville’s fame is as much for its southern traditions as it is for its northern progressivism. This dichotomous reputation began in the post-Civil War era and continues to the present day. During the Reconstruction years, many saw Louisville as unusually tolerant. In stark contrast to virtually all former slaveholding territory, Louisville’s black citizens freely exercised their right to vote, the city never segregated public transportation, and there was little to no systemic racial violence in the city. By the time the modern civil rights movement began in the 1950s, the city already employed African-American police officers, firefighters, and other public servants, including three black police sergeants.<sup>1</sup>

While the city of Louisville rejected many of the legal trappings of segregation, it embraced those related to social interaction between the races. There was a clear divide between the public and the private. Black and white Louisvillians might ride the same bus to work, but they certainly would not be getting drinks afterward. For example, African-Americans lived in all of Louisville’s twelve wards,

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt: Gonzo Papers, Volume I, Strange Tales from a Strange Time* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1979); George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).



but when a black family moved into a white suburb in 1954, all hell broke loose. This social segregation included segregated schools, a nearly universal practice in the former slave states of the South. However, while Louisville maintained southern tradition and segregated its students by race, the city's public schools for African-Americans bore little resemblance to their counterparts in the rest of the South. In fact, Louisville's African-American schools also had little in common with those found in the rest of Kentucky.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation tells the story of Louisville's African-American public schools from their creation through their desegregation in 1956. Most historians interested in the intersections of race and education know the history of Louisville, with its resistance to court-ordered busing in the 1970s and its ability in recent decades to resist resegregation as other urban centers failed once courts rescinded said busing orders. However, there is little scholarship on race and education in Louisville prior to the 1970s and virtually nothing published on African-American schools prior to the 1950s. The history of Louisville's black schools sheds significant light on the events that transpired after desegregation.

My work begins in 1840 with the creation of private schools for African-American children in the decades prior to the Civil War. With a dissertation spanning over 115 years, each chapter of my dissertation tackles different topics and arguments. However, one central question does emerge: How can a black community compel

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<sup>2</sup> George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); Tracy K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky 1945-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009); Anne Braden, *The Wall Between* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

white leadership to improve their schools when most consider those schools to be some of the best for African-Americans in the South? This question echoes a larger issue faced by African-Americans in Louisville. The liberties, economic prospects, and civic life for African-Americans in Louisville was demonstrably and quantifiably better than what could be found elsewhere in former slave states, including other urban areas. The city's black men had the franchise from the ratification of the 15th Amendment, black churches functioned and flourished, and so on. As such, agitation by the city's black community to improve the equality of their opportunities met with resistance from whites in leadership who could easily point to the superiority of the opportunities they conferred on them. For instance, when black Republicans complained that local party leadership was not putting any of them up for public office or government positions, Louisville's Republican leadership told them that they were lucky to have any political rights at all. Despite these circumstances, over time Louisville's African-American community successfully secured increased equality.

The fight for African-Americans in Louisville to secure educations of equal quality to those afforded white students met a similar struggle. My research discusses the relative strength of black education in Louisville public schools, while also pointing to their inferiority to white offerings in the city. Louisville whites prided themselves on the quality of their black schools, which in many cases were superior to those provided even to white students in much of the state. However, Louisville's black community sought equality for their children's education. This is the crux of their challenge and part of why understanding education for African-Americans in Louisville is so important. There are many published histories where oppressed African-Americans in the South fought to get even a basic education for their children,

but how do you force the hands of white leadership to improve your schools when they believe you already have more than you deserve?

The sources this dissertation utilizes to try to answer this question varied depending on the time period. Unfortunately, there was no black press in Louisville until *The Louisville Leader* began publishing in 1917. Sadly, a fire and water damage destroyed most of their archive, resulting in few readable copies of *The Louisville Leader*. It is not until 1933, with *The Louisville Defender*, that there is a consistent black press source. Fortunately, Louisville's mainstream press outlets, *The Louisville Times* and *The Courier-Journal*, did cover some aspects of black life and education.

A great deal of the primary sources that laid the basis for this dissertation came from the Jefferson County Public School Archives. This archive houses the Louisville public schools' records due to a city-county merger in 1975. The sources accessed at this archive include board-meeting minutes starting from just before the inception of black public schools in 1870. There are also annual publications by the board that illuminated the reasoning behind board decisions and large initiatives. Some of Louisville's superintendents, especially Omer Carmichael who oversaw the 1956 desegregation, kept other primary sources like correspondence and copies of their speeches. Various pamphlets, yearbooks, and other documents supplemented the research.

The greatest source challenge was finding African-American voices. For pre-Civil War years, William Gibson and Henry Weeden's brief histories of black life in Louisville helped illuminate the earliest years of African-American education in the city. As Gibson was one of the founders of a number of the city's black private schools, his work was invaluable. Archives at the University of Louisville provided

more information on Albert Meyzeek, one of the early agitators for improved education for Louisville's black children. This university also houses the Lyman Johnson papers. Johnson was leading advocate for black education in Louisville and the state of Kentucky. In addition to work done in Louisville's public schools, he also was the plaintiff in the case that desegregated graduate programs in Kentucky. *The Louisville Defender* supplements these archival sources after the year 1933, when they began publishing editorials by local black community members and articles on local black politics and life in Louisville.

Given the 115-year scope of this work and its narrative style, I arranged the dissertation chronologically, with chapters organized around key turning points and issues. "From Private to Public" covers the years 1841-1872. This chapter begins with the creation of private schools for African-American children running primarily out of black churches, discusses their incredible growth after the Civil War, and concludes with those schools transitioning into the public school system. My third chapter, "The Early Years of Louisville's African-American Public Schools," examines the rapid growth of these public schools between 1872 and 1902. This chapter's highlights include the use of white tax dollars to fund these black schools, the role of black teachers and administrators in the public school system, and an expansion of services for black students, including some services that were rarely available for most white students in the South at that time. The fourth chapter, "A New Board of Education and Its Consequences for Louisville's African-American Community," chronicles the significant transition to a new electoral process and governance style for the school board that began in 1910. It then discusses how these changes impact black schools over the next two decades. "Increased Opportunities, Increased Inequality, 1894-

1920” focuses on the rise of vocational education in Louisville schools, specifically, how the Board of Education increasingly provided unequal opportunities to students along racial and economic lines. Chapter Six, “The Struggle for Equality, 1930-1954,” explores the impact of the Great Depression on black education in Louisville, African-American teachers’ battle to achieve salary equality, and the entire black community’s fight to get improved facilities for the only black high school in the city. Chapter Seven concludes my dissertation with an examination of the city’s response to the Supreme Court’s *Brown* and *Brown II* decisions and the subsequent desegregation of Louisville’s public schools in the fall of 1956.

Given the breadth of this work, what appears to be the key to Louisville’s African-Americans achieving some parity in educational opportunities for their children between 1840 and 1956? A major factor was the strength of the city’s free black community and their private schools gave them control over the schools as they transitioned into the public system in 1870. While they answered to an all-white school board, the African-American principals and faculty running these schools implemented a standard of education pleasing to their community. Louisville’s normal school for African-Americans kept an ample supply of these teachers on the ready as the schools grew. Also important was that in those first decades, the ward system and its ward-based elections gave African-American voters influence over both the school board and aldermen (city council). These white leaders kept their black constituents happy by providing for these voters’ children.

Once the aldermen elections switched from ward to citywide in 1893, African-Americans began to lose their political clout in Louisville. However, it was the transition of school board elections from ward-based to citywide in 1910 that truly

damaged the black community's ability to leverage votes for improvements to their children's educations. It is in the decades after this school board change that we see the inequalities between education for whites and blacks in the city widen significantly. While I would not argue that education for black and white children was equal in 1910, the policies of the new Board of Education turned those existing inequalities from a crack into a chasm. The only reason black schools received any quality attention in the 1910s and 1920s was due to the new school board's general education reform platform with a focus on vocational education. While they most definitely created educational opportunities for black students that tracked them into careers inferior to those expected for white students, the board was committed to making those educational experiences worthwhile and they did improve African-American school facilities.

Fortunately, for the black community and their schools, the 1930s saw a resurgence of black political power resulting from the local Republicans and Democrats scramble to curry favor from the black community to maintain power. The black community used this opportunity to force the school board to include black school facilities in their bond issues and, most impressively, to equalize black and white teachers' salaries in the final years of the Great Depression. In the 1940s and 1950s, African-Americans also began to find success challenging educational inequality through the courts. Such cases resulted in desegregation in Kentucky's graduate and some undergraduate programs. Seeking to avoid a case that might result in the city's public schools desegregating, Louisville's Board of Education committed itself to making sure it appeared to provide separate but equal opportunities for its

black students. The primary beneficiary of this effort was Central High School, which finally received a new school facility in 1952.

When the *Brown* decision came in 1954, no one was surprised when Louisville's Board of Education announced it would comply with the court order. The local black community agreed not to sue the Board to take action on desegregation if it promised to desegregate by the fall of 1956. The board fulfilled their end of that bargain, and in the fall of 1956, the national media heralded Louisville Public Schools for their successful desegregation and called it a model for other southern school systems to follow. However, the level of actual pupil integration was questionable and the Board's resistance to faculty integration served as reminders that the Board's primary concern was not achieving racial equality, but was instead creating a desegregation plan that was palatable to Louisville's white citizens.

This study of Louisville's African-American public schools complements work completed in a number of related historical fields. First, my work gives a border state perspective on histories of the urban South, especially in the post-Civil War but pre-Great Migration period. Howard Rabinowitz's *Race Relations in the Urban South*, Michael Fitzgerald's *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile*, and Peter Rachleff's *Black Labor in Richmond*, are all excellent works on the subject, but are all also from the last century. Jaqueline Jones's *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War*, published in 2008, serves as a more recent example of this area of study. Clearly, the work done on the lives of African-Americans in the urban south pales in comparison to the massive library of work on black lives in the rural south.

Another area of study to which my work contributes is the history of education. Given that my work covers over a century, different sections of my work speak to different narratives. First, my study of African-American education prior to the Civil War stands in contrast to narratives in similar cities, like Saint Louis, where education for blacks became unlawful. Louisville's growing network of private schools and their ability to educate slaves without penalty was incredibly rare. The second area is my work on Louisville during Reconstruction and into the 1890s. Other than Hilary Green's *Educational Reconstruction: African-American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890*, which focuses on Richmond, Virginia, and Mobile, Alabama, there are no significant works on education in the urban south in this period. Louisville's story of the creation of black public schools differs greatly from Richmond and Mobile's, most notably in the lack of northern missionary or Freedmen's Bureau intervention and assistance. Third, the story of the Louisville teachers' salary fight needed to be revealed. Other historians have virtually ignored Louisville's teacher salary victory. Several works on the NAACP's campaign for salary parity omitted the Louisville case, probably because Thurgood Marshall never truly had control over the local efforts to work with the Board of Education. Lastly, little to no academic writing has examined the "successful" desegregation of Louisville public schools in 1956. This is surprising given that the press nationally heralded this desegregation.

In the final evaluation, what makes the story of African-American education in Louisville, Kentucky, historiographically relevant is the way in which the city's black community created opportunities for themselves. In the early years they did not need support or intervention from philanthropic or government institutions. When possible,



black voters used political agency to get what they believed their children and their schools deserved. In later years, they did not depend on the NAACP to create change in the city, but worked with—and often pressured—the school board and city government to achieve their goals. While the education African-American youths received in Louisville outshone that received by their black peers elsewhere in the South, the black community never stopped fighting for improvements with the outcome of equality as their objective.

## **Chapter 2**

### **FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC, 1841-1872**

#### **Introduction**

Beginning in the 1840s, Louisville's African-American community created and maintained a system of private schools for their children. Upon the advent of emancipation, these established institutions expanded as they absorbed the influx of freedmen's children after the war. This successful educational network enabled Louisville's black community to maintain control of their schools when the Freedmen's Bureau and northern missionary organizations usurped authority from other African-American education initiatives throughout the South. While most schools for children of color floundered once the Bureau left Kentucky, Louisville's schools persisted. The strength of their private schools aided the city's African-American community in their quest to receive public, tax-funded status for their schools. Once the city acquiesced to their demands for public schooling in 1870, black education in Louisville became a school system that featured relative equality with white public schools and places for African-Americans in positions of authority. The success of Louisville's black public schools is firmly rooted in the early success and persistence of the private schools the African-American community created in the pre-war era.

This study contributes to the growing literature on African-American education prior to the Civil War, as well as that on black urban communities during Reconstruction. Kentucky's status as a border state and Louisville's position as an

urban center within the state makes the study of African-American education an interesting counterpoint to the existing historiography.

### **Private Sector Education for Louisville's African-Americans, 1841-1869**

The future development of Louisville's public school system for African-Americans is rooted in the creation of a number of robust private schools for blacks in the decades preceding the Civil War. While most southern states restricted the education of African-Americans in the decades before the Civil War, Kentucky never had such legislation. This fact, coupled with the existence of a sizable free black population in the city, led to the creation of openly operating private schools for African-Americans years before they would become available in most of the South. That African-American churches housed or sponsored most of these schools increased their acceptance by the white community. In the post-war era, these private schools were able to accommodate many of the educational needs of Louisville's booming freedmen population. The benefits of educating Louisville's African-American youth were on display and this played a significant role in rousing white support for future efforts to create public facilities. Additionally, the fact that local blacks administered these schools and hired black faculty set an important precedent for the public schools that would eventually follow.

While there is evidence of frontier schools in the area as early as 1782, the city of Louisville approved of the creation of public schools in April 1829, not long after the city incorporated in 1828. The first public school in Louisville, Kentucky, opened in August 1829 for white children ages six to fourteen. It was the first free public school in Kentucky and one of the first in the nation west of the Appalachian

Mountains. While Kentucky became a state in 1792, its constitution made no provisions for public education and the state legislature did not create a common school system until 1838. Nationally, public schools began to develop between 1830 and 1860, so Louisville was just ahead of that educational movement.<sup>3</sup>

Louisville's first public school met in rented space on the upper story of a local Baptist church. It then moved from these temporary lodgings into a new school building in 1830. This was a fine, three-story building whose land and construction cost the city over \$12,000. When the move occurred, the school averaged 400 students supervised by only three teachers. Over the next eleven years, there was population growth in the city and by 1840 Louisville was the twelfth largest city in the United States with a population of just over 34,000. Correspondingly, the school system grew rapidly and established thirteen more public schools with a total student body just under 1300 that same year. By the 1843-4 school year, there were twelve primary and five grammar schools under the public system operating alongside approximately forty private schools. These public schools received little financial assistance from the state of Kentucky. For example, in 1840 the city only received a little over eight-hundred dollars from the state, which was not even enough to pay the salary of one of their schools' principals.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio* (Louisville, 1979) 23-48; J. Stoddard Johnston, ed., *A Memorial History of Louisville* (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing Co., 1896) 230-240.

<sup>4</sup> Yater, 48; Johnston, 230-240; George D. Wilson, *A Century of Negro Education in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville: Louisville Municipal College, 1941) 2; Edwina Ann Doyle, ed., *From the Fort to the Future: Educating the Children of Kentucky* (Lexington: Kentucky Images, 1987) 357.

According to the census of 1840, there were 619 free blacks in Louisville, which constituted less than two percent of the city's total population, along with 3,430 slaves. However, many of the city's slaves lived very similarly to freedmen and thus supplemented the free black community. While Kentucky's 1798 slave code did not permit the state's slaves to lease themselves out, it was a common practice throughout the commonwealth—especially in Louisville. Tax records from 1833 reveal that upwards of 20% of Louisville's slaves leased out their labor. These leased slaves often lived separately from their masters, simply giving them a cut of their earnings. Some of these leased slaves saved the funds to purchase their freedom; some even accumulated thousands of dollars. Such monetary success resulted from the many career opportunities open to African-Americans in the city. Louisville's position as an important port city on the Ohio River and as a key railroad hub opened up many jobs in both those areas as well as in construction, where many free men of color worked as carpenters and plasterers. Free women found paid work as laundresses, seamstresses, and (later) as teachers. Many freedmen chose to remain in Kentucky because their economic prospects in Louisville were stronger than if they traveled to the North.<sup>5</sup>

Louisville's freedmen, and many leased slaves, lived throughout almost all of Louisville's wards, but mostly in wards three, four, five, and six, where wealthy Louisville citizens needed their labor. These people of color lived in de facto segregated areas within the wards, usually on their southern ends. One four-block area

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<sup>5</sup> William H. Gibson, *Historical Sketch of the Progress of the Colored Race in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville: Bradley & Gilbert Company, 1897); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1960) 8-15; J. Blaine Hudson, "'Upon This Rock' - The Free African American Community of Antebellum Louisville, Kentucky" *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 109, no. ¾ Exploring Kentucky's African American Past (Summer/Autumn 2011): 295-326; Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Kentucky Historical Society, 2003)101-111.

alone contained 25% of the city's independent African-Americans. Strengthening these growing black communities was the presence of strong family units. Marriage between Kentucky's free people of color became legal in 1825 and records show that more than half of the city's free black households were two-parent homes with the father holding an occupation. Additionally, census data shows that free blacks often lived in extended family or multiple family residences with a male head of the household. These circumstances contributed to Louisville's relatively high number of African-Americans under the age of ten who did not work.<sup>6</sup>

This combination of factors—freedmen and slaves with income, black family units, and a high number of children—led to a need for formal education for the children of both local black citizens and slaves. There is no record of any agitation for Louisville's public schools to admit these children; instead, with the permission of local authorities, the African-American community created a number of private institutions to educate their youth. Louisville's African-Americans are not unique in taking the initiative to provide education for their children. Many communities of color throughout the South created opportunities for education for both free people of color and slaves.<sup>7</sup>

While the historiography on African-American schools in the South prior to the Civil War is limited, it is abundantly clear that the legality of education for blacks varied throughout the southern states. The states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Maryland never legally prohibited education for free people of color nor those in slavery. Some states, such as Louisiana, forbade education for those enslaved but did

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<sup>6</sup> This four-block area was between Ninth, Chestnut, Eleventh, and Walnut Streets. Lucas, 101-111; Hudson, 295-326; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 8-15.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Clay Weeden, *History of the Colored People of Louisville* (Louisville: H.C. Weeden, 1897) 22.

not restrict education for free African-Americans. South Carolina forbade the education of slaves as early as 1740, but only outlawed education for free African-Americans in 1834. Still more slave states had no laws on the topic of black education until the decades just before the Civil War when concerns over literate slaves became more widespread. White politicians often cited the revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831 as either the impetus or justification for such laws. For example, in Missouri many slaves and free persons of color received education before 1847 when the state outlawed education for all persons of color. Regardless of the legalities, both free and slave African-Americans maintained schools before the Civil War. Local law simply dictated whether these schools could function openly or as clandestine operations.<sup>8</sup>

In Louisville, the advent of schools for African-American children sprung from the rise of black community churches and organizations. As Louisville's free black population grew in the decades prior to the Civil War, African-Americans began to form their own community institutions, the most prominent of which were their churches. Slaves with their master's permission and free African-Americans joined the First Baptist Church of Louisville beginning in the 1820s, and they had their own black minister by the end of the decade. Their numbers grew to the point where white church leadership approved their creation of First African Baptist Church, a separate, but affiliated, branch of the church in 1842. While many of the city's black churches

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<sup>8</sup> David Freeman, "African-American Schooling in the South Prior to 1861" *The Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 1-47; Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers Incorporated, 1919); Donnie D. Bellamy, "The Education of Blacks in Missouri Prior to 1861" *The Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 2 (April 1974): 143-157.

spun off white congregations, many others were independent African-American denominations; these included a number of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches. By the 1850s, there were at least eight black churches in the city. These churches extended beyond mere houses of worship to function as the primary vessels of community support. This included care for the elderly, infirmed, orphaned, and poor. Additionally, Louisville's black churches created a social space where the community could gather. Fraternal orders including the Masons and the United Brother of Friendship built lodges, providing additional social and professional networking for the city's independent persons of color. The creation of these community spaces for African-Americans directly contributed to the initiation of educational opportunities for the city's black children.<sup>9</sup>

The city's African-American churches helped launch a number of private schools for both free and slave children. While some historians report that a black private school in Louisville began in 1827 and another in 1834, there are no established records of these schools and, when mentioned, observers characterized them as short-lived. The first clear record of a private school for African-Americans began in December 1841 when Reverend Henry Adams, the pastor for black members of Louisville's First Baptist Church, established Louisville's first school for free-black children and reported five pupils. Henry Adams was a powerhouse preacher born in Georgia who led popular revivals and was famous for converting thousands of people. In 1842, the year after he launched the school, the African-American membership of First Baptist Church grew so large that they separated to form First African Baptist

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<sup>9</sup> Hudson, 295-326; William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising* (Cleveland: Geo M. Rewell & Co, 1887); Gibson, 3-83.



Church (which later changed its name to Fifth Street Baptist Church). His school went by the less-than-creative title of Adams School and was located on Woods Alley between Ninth and Tenth Streets, though it would soon move into Fifth Street Baptist's facilities.<sup>10</sup>

The school would grow over the years to require a faculty of four teachers and remained open until the establishment of public schools for black students, closing only during the war years. There are no reports of any objections to this school by local whites, for which the church's reputation deserves much of the credit. The exodus of black members from First Baptist to their own independent congregation went smoothly and they continued to enjoy a good relationship with and protection from First Baptist Church. Fifth Street Baptist would go on to gain a national reputation as one of the finest black churches owned by African-Americans. They also publically held congregates to very high moral standards. Any objections whites had to black education conflicted with the larger community's support for the work of Fifth Street Baptist Church. Adams' status as a minister and the reputation of his church spared his school from open opposition. The school that historians report opened in 1834 was not church-affiliated; a married couple ran that school. This school closed quickly due to hostility from whites, so the protection Adams' received from First Baptist Church of Louisville should not be undervalued.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Doyle, 245; Frank L. McVey, *The Gates Open Slowly: A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1949) 145; Freedman, 1-47; Wilson, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, 4; Lucas, 123-125; Freeman, 1-47.

Adams and his Fifth Street Baptist Church School would be the only one of its kind for a few years, but the late 1840s saw a barrage of black, church-affiliated schools in Louisville. A new school in the image of Fifth Street Baptist's opened in mid-1847, led by Robert M. Lane, affiliated with the Fourth-Street Colored Methodist Church (later known as Asbury Chapel). William. H. Gibson, Sr. initially came to Louisville to assist with Lane's school in 1847, and would soon become the city's leader in education. Six months after beginning work for Lane, in January 1848, Gibson left and opened his own school in the basement of the Fourth-Street Methodist Episcopal Church. This school became so popular, with close to 100 students, that it nearly absorbed all of the other black private schools. Gibson's choice to offer both day and night classes contributed to his school's popularity. What was not very popular was the location of Gibson's school. Located at Fourth and Green streets, this school was in the center of the city. Due to its affiliation with an established church possessing white allies, the school's decriers backed down. This conflict over having a black school located in a white residential area foreshadows both the later choice to locate black public schools in neighborhoods with a high concentration of African-Americans and future resistance to proposals for black schools in or near white residential areas.<sup>12</sup>

Gibson's school is additionally significant for its admission of slaves along with free black children. Gibson wrote, in an 1897 historical sketch, that this was possible due to their policy of only teaching slaves who had written permission from their masters. Gibson reports having hundreds of permits on file and asserted that

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<sup>12</sup> Weeden, 22; Gibson, 4; Lucas 126-138.

Christian slave owners did not object to their slaves receiving an education. Henry Clay Weeden, in his 1897 *History of the Colored People of Louisville*, also reports that a large number of slave children attended Louisville's private schools alongside free children; he also emphasized that they attended with the consent of their masters. As previously stated, many of these slave children were from the homes of the relatively independent, leased slaves.<sup>13</sup>

There are multiple reports of a fourth school in Louisville run by an African-American, Reverend Peter Booth, though there is no clear date for when the school was established; it seems to have also come into existence in the 1840s. The details are also vague on schools opening around this time at Center Street Methodist and Green Street Baptist, though the historical record later discusses them as reopening after the war. There are mentions of other small private schools taught during this period by a Mrs. Hoffman, Miss Cummins, Henry Harrison, and a Mr. Sites. One can surmise that there was a great deal of flux with these small private schools during this initial venture into formal education for Louisville's African-Americans. With funds from the Quaker Friends of Indiana, Bethel A.M.E. Church opened a school in 1854 that served both free and slave children. By 1858, Asbury Chapel's school added courses that provided training in Latin, geometry and algebra for advanced black students. Six of these students, including William Gibson's son, were able to follow the school's upper-level instructor, R.G. Mortimore, to Wilberforce College when he became their chair of mathematics.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gibson, 4-5; Weeden, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Weeden 22; Gibson, 12-13, 38, 70; Lucas, 143.

The consistent connection between local African-American churches and educational opportunities for blacks was not unique to Louisville. Sabbath schools existed all over the South both before and after the Civil War. As was the case in Louisville, these schools were for black students and run by African-American church leadership or their surrogates. However, Louisville's are distinctive for three key reasons. First, Louisville's private black schools almost exclusively served children, while most Sabbath schools also taught adults. Second, Louisville's Sabbath Schools generally ran a comparable school day, while the majority of such schools were open in the evenings to accommodate the workday or on Sundays. Lastly, many of these Sabbath Schools were clandestine. As far as the white public knew, these Sabbath Schools were simply Sunday Schools teaching the word of God. However, there is clear evidence that many churches used Sunday School lessons as a cover to teach literacy. After the war, Sabbath Schools throughout the South- both open and formerly clandestine- had positive relationships with the Freedmen's Bureau due to their organized management and high attendance, just as Louisville's private black institutions cultivated an excellent relationship with the Bureau.<sup>15</sup>

While Sabbath Schools shared the common bond of church-affiliation with Louisville's private black schools, the best sources of comparison for Louisville's African-Americans schools are with institutions from other urban, southern areas. Saint Louis, Missouri, boasted a number of private African-American schools serving

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel L. Horst, "Education for Manhood: the Education of Blacks in Virginia during the Civil War" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1977); Freeman, 1-47; Leonard P. Curry, "Free Blacks in the Urban South: 1800-1850" *The Southern Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 35-51.

both slave and free pupils from the early 1800s. Like Louisville, the most enduring of these schools in Saint Louis affiliated with churches. Just as Louisville's First African Baptist Church provided the city's first private black school, Saint Louis's First African Baptist Church provided the city's first private school offered by African-Americans for African-Americans. Saint Louis launched its educational efforts decades before Louisville's, but they would be relatively short lived since Missouri's legislature forbade all black education in 1847, forcing all of Saint Louis's schools underground. Charleston, South Carolina, also had private schools with church ties before new state laws forced them underground after 1834. Private schools for African-Americans in Nashville, Tennessee, exemplified the importance of schools aligning themselves with black or white churches. While Nashville is not far from Louisville and possessed a number of demographic similarities, all of its private school ventures were short-lived with many ending due to violence or threats of violence. Church-affiliation might have provided Nashville's black schools the measure of security and stability they needed to survive.<sup>16</sup>

While all of Louisville's black schools were associated with churches and had African-American faculty and administration, some local whites did engage in the education of both slaves and free blacks. William Gibson recalled that whites from various Christian denominations taught Bible reading classes, presented Christian lectures, and provided supplies like maps and charts. Due to the religious bent of this work, volunteers were able to avoid an abolitionist stigma.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bellamy, 143-157; Freeman, 1-47.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson, 23.

Louisville's African-Americans were not the only ones in the state of Kentucky seeking educational opportunities for their children prior to emancipation. The first day school for Kentucky African-American children opened in the capital city of Frankfort in 1820, and in the early 1830s, First African Baptist Church of Lexington began a school, though it had a white teacher. By 1850, sixteen Kentucky counties had schools for African-Americans. Of the free African-American children living in the state, about 12% were attending schools by 1850; unsurprisingly, the majority of them lived in Louisville. Kentucky's capital city of Frankfort and the state's second largest city, Lexington, were the two other cities with significant free people of color populations, but they never approached Louisville's numbers.<sup>18</sup>

While black education remained relegated to private sponsorship, Louisville's public school system for white students experienced a period of growth in the 1850s. In 1851, Louisville's new city charter required that each city ward have at least one public school and that a Board of Trustees of the Public Schools with two representatives from each ward would control all public schools. This precedent of distributing schools throughout the city wards influenced the later distribution of colored public schools in wards where African-Americans resided. Among these new schools were Louisville's first high schools, aptly named Male and Female High School, which opened in 1856.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Lucas, 141; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States* (Washington D.C., 1851) 144-145.

<sup>19</sup> Yater, 79; William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011) 93.

By 1860, the free black population in Louisville increased over the preceding decades to 1,917 persons, while the local slave population decreased from 5,432 in 1850 to 4,903 in 1860. Local historians speculate that the reduction resulted from owners turning a profit selling slaves further south to cotton plantations and the rise of cheap immigrant labor in Louisville. African-Americans, slave or free, represented only 10% of Louisville's population by 1860, while the white population increased to over 61,000. In regard to school growth, these numbers indicate why white public schools grew so rapidly during the 1850s, while there was incremental growth in the private African-American schools from 1840 through 1860. While white population growth may have outpaced that of the African-American community, the black population numbers were still enough to give Louisville the largest community of free people of color in the south other than Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>20</sup>

Advancing the cause of education for local African-Americans soon took a backseat to the larger fight over slavery itself. Kentucky, though a slave state, had opted to remain a part of the Union, initially as a neutral state. It was common in Louisville to see groups of Union recruits marching down one side of the street and a group of Confederate recruits on the other—though the state contributed about three Union soldiers for each Confederate. Circumstances soon forced Kentucky out of neutrality in September of 1861, and Louisville became a key hub for the Union as a medical center, temporary holdings for Confederate prisoners, and a supply base for both railroad and river transportation. Despite the Confederates' best efforts in an 1862 invasion of Kentucky, they were unable to take the city of Louisville. Since Kentucky

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<sup>20</sup> Yater, 80-81; Lucas, xx; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C., 1915) 8-15.

was a part of the Union, the Emancipation Proclamation would not affect the status of the state's slaves; it was the recruitment of slaves into the Union army that slowly dismantled the peculiar institution in Kentucky before it officially ended with the Thirteenth Amendment. Almost 30,000 Kentucky African-Americans served in the war, a number only exceeded by Louisiana.<sup>21</sup>

The status of Louisville's private, African-American schools during the Civil War years is not altogether clear. Sources indicate that the schools ran until September of 1862. The decision to close these local schools was likely a practical one, and not the result of pressure from white authorities. For instance, William Gibson left Louisville in 1862 to take charge of a school in Indianapolis after a physician's release from "the spade and shovel brigade" that drafted thousands of Louisville's colored citizens, a draft that may have occupied the daylight hours of other African-American teachers. All relevant source material implies that most of the private schools reopened at the conclusion of the war. Gibson, specifically, returned to Louisville in July 1866 and resumed his work in education, reporting that while there were still no public schools for black children there were private schools funded by their patrons.<sup>22</sup>

As was the case throughout the former slave states, a dramatic increase in education for blacks occurred after the Civil War. With emancipation achieved, freedmen throughout the South would launch a variety of efforts to educate their young people. The popular narrative that northern philanthropists and missionaries brought education to Southern blacks is a false notion. Evidence shows that freed

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<sup>21</sup>Yater p82, 89, 91; George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 17.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, 1-42; Weeden, 22; Gibson, 52; Simmons, 546.



slaves throughout the South spearheaded education efforts for themselves and their children; northern whites and the Freedmen's Bureau arrived later, giving financial and staffing support to these grassroots efforts. One example of such grassroots efforts was when in New Orleans, former slaves began setting up their own private schools years before the Civil War concluded. The Northern military leadership that occupied the city strongly supported their work. By the time the Freedmen's Bureau took over the freedmen's education efforts in 1865, New Orleans boasted 126 schools for African-Americans. In Georgia, black leaders created the Georgia Educational Association to raise funds and support for their own educations. By the fall of 1866, this group financed 96 schools and owned 57 buildings. In Mobile, Alabama, private schools affiliated with black churches sprung up within in days of the end of the Civil War that soon after received support from the Freedmen's Bureau and the Northwestern Freedmen's Aid Society out of Chicago.<sup>23</sup>

Back in Louisville, local black churches quickly moved to reopen their schools after the war. Recently freed slaves in the area had a significant advantage over their counterparts throughout much of the South since there was already an established network of private schools from which they could seek an education. Fifth Street Baptist school, still under the leadership of Henry Adams, continued to be a leader in education and his school grew to an enrollment of 250 by July 1865. The school met for five and a half hours a day, five days a week. Green Street Baptist and Center

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<sup>23</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 4-31; Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction, African-American Schools in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016) 1-36.

Street Methodist both reopened quickly and each had over one hundred students by the summer of 1865. Asbury Chapel's school enrollment also quickly grew to one hundred once it reopened. William Gibson set up a branch of his school at Quinn Chapel before he left for the war (he had also set up schools outside of Louisville), and it was at this school that he resumed his teaching when he returned to the city in 1866. Naturally, as he was one of the foremost educators in the city, Quinn Chapel's school was soon over maximum capacity with almost one hundred students.<sup>24</sup>

Louisville's black churches also created new schools for the purposes of educating both children and adults who now sought an education. Two new schools opened in 1865, one by the Jackson Street Methodist Episcopal Church and another by St. Mark's Episcopal Church. The school at Jackson Street reported an enrollment of over one hundred children by 1866. Mrs. Cook, from a Methodist Episcopal church in the North, was the first teacher of the school and northern Methodists paid her salary, allowing the school to waive tuition for all her pupils. St. Mark's school opened with much pomp and circumstance, boasting many elites in attendance, including President Lincoln's Attorney General James Speed who spoke at the event. St. Mark's principal, Miss Cornelia A. Jennings, was a successful principal imported from Philadelphia. Catholic services for African-Americans in Louisville began in the late 1860s. Saint Augustine Church and School opened in 1869. Of all the Catholic schools created for African-Americans in Kentucky, Saint Augustine would be the only one to persist when public schools eventually opened for African-Americans throughout the state.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lucas, 143, 237.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, 16.

In addition to local private efforts, the extension of the Freedmen's Bureau to Kentucky in December 1865, with Louisville as its headquarters, gave additional energy to efforts to extend educational opportunities to the local black population. However, since Kentucky was technically an offshoot of the Tennessee branch, the state's freedmen did not receive any real attention until Kentucky became a separate branch in late 1866. The first school opened by the Freedmen's Bureau, the Ely Normal School, was for the training of black teachers and was the only non-private, tuition-free school for African-Americans in Louisville. While new school creation was the Bureau's primary focus throughout the rest of Kentucky (due to the number of thriving private schools already in Louisville), the Freedmen's Bureau focused on the teacher shortage in the city as opposed to creating new schools. In contrast to Louisville's other private schools for blacks in this period, the Ely School had a predominantly white faculty (with only one African-American faculty member while it was open). While Ely was intended for teacher training, as implicit in its naming as a normal school, of the nearly 400 students it initially enrolled only 40 partook of teacher training; all other pupils received elementary-level education.<sup>26</sup>

The Ely building was a two-story brick structure with eight rooms and, in 1868, was considered one of the best school facilities in Louisville. It cost over

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<sup>26</sup> There are many historical works that refer to this as the "Ealy" Normal School. It is, in fact, "Ely" as it is named after General John Ely of the Union Army. The Daily Journal spelled the name incorrectly in its press coverage, which is likely the source of the confusion.

Weeden, 22; Wilson, 13; Philip Clyde Kimball, "Freedom's Harvest: Freedmen's School in Kentucky after the Civil War" *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 154 (1980): 272-288.

\$18,000 to construct with funds primarily from the federal government and the American Missionary Society of New York. Not long after the Freedmen's Bureau received praise for this relatively lavish school building, the Kentucky branch began to suffer from decreased funding and left the state by the end of 1869. However, the American Missionary Society did continue to administer Ely until 1871.<sup>27</sup>

Elsewhere in Kentucky, Lexington initially followed the same church-based school pattern as Louisville in the early years after the war. Unlike in Louisville where its efforts focused on the normal school created by the Freedmen's Bureau, the American Missionary Association was extremely active in that city and worked extensively in Lexington until 1874. Outside of Louisville and Lexington, the post-Civil War education landscape for African-Americans was far bleaker. There was some activity in towns located in central and western Kentucky, but most areas in the state—especially the further north and east one traveled—were far too impoverished to make any sort of educational progress for whites, let alone African-Americans. It was not until the Freedmen's Bureau began to focus on this issue around 1867 that any educational progress came about in most parts of the state. As a result of the efforts of many, by the spring of 1869, approximately 270 African-American schools served over 10,000 students. Sadly, most of these schools disappeared into the ether once the Freedmen's Bureau left the state at the end of 1869.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> There was much debate over the actual cost of the facility. Local newspapers had stated numbers as high as \$30,000, but the press later corrected the amount to \$18,258.

*Louisville Daily Courier*, April 7, 1868; April 22, 1868; Weeden, 22; Wilson, 13; *The Courier-Journal*, July 17, 1868; Lucas, 246.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas, 233-242.

Just as Louisville's post-war education experience for African-Americans differed from the rest of Kentucky, so too did it differ from other urban areas in the South. One advantage was that Louisville had private schools from before the war that quickly reopened and absorbed the freedmen. The pre-war legacies of these schools gave them the stability to withstand takeovers by the Freedmen's Bureau and American Missionary Society, as was the case with the freshly launched African-American community schools in Richmond, Virginia; Mobile, Alabama; and Lexington, Kentucky. A primary reason those communities welcomed the outside assistance was a lack of qualified teachers and a desire for white allies. While Louisville's private schools' explosive growth made the creation of Ely Normal School a welcome addition to the city's educational offerings, virtually all of Louisville's schoolteachers were African-American. Decades of providing education to black students meant they could staff their private schools and they expressed no fear of white opposition to their schools. By contrast, black communities in Mobile and Richmond expressed preferences for African-American teachers, but did not have enough candidates to staff them. Hence, these communities accepted of the influx of white teachers into their schools and the security those alliances provided.<sup>29</sup>

While the initial creation of private schools for African-Americans in Louisville in the 1840s and their relaunches after the Civil War were a source of great pride for the black community, they still lacked city-backed, tax-funded schools. Just as Louisville's path to private education differed from other urban centers before and after the war, so too would they differ in their path to achieving public education.

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<sup>29</sup> Green, 1-65; Kimball, 272-288.

## **Moving Toward Public Schools for African-Americans in Louisville, 1865-1870**

As the 1860s came to a close, the landscape of schools for African-Americans in Louisville was poised for radical change. Despite a lack of initiative at the state level, Louisville leadership endorsed the creation of public schools for blacks because of concerns over the rapid growth of the city's freedmen population, the withdrawal of the Freedmen's Bureau, agitation by African-American leaders, and the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

In the final months of the Civil War, a significant influx of African-Americans entered the city; a large portion of the newcomers were former slaves. By 1870, the African-American population in Louisville had almost doubled since 1860, reaching an estimated 15,000 African-Americans out of a city total of just over 100,000 residents. This development alarmed many white Louisville citizens. In 1865, local military leadership, instead of returning more than 5,000 slaves to their masters (this was prior to ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment), actually issued passes that allowed them to head north over the Ohio River while informing them that they could not remain in Kentucky. This strategy, while it did remove many freedmen from Louisville, quickly became a failed stopgap measure since thousands more former slaves soon arrived in town. At that point, the Freedmen's Bureau had already launched its education and support efforts for the freedmen, so the city leadership required no extreme measures to handle the issue.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kentucky had preexisting laws on the books intended to discourage freedmen from living in Kentucky. For example, one law from 1818 forbade free blacks from other states from moving to Kentucky. A law from 1851 required any emancipated slaves in Kentucky to leave the state for free soil.

But what was to happen now that the Freedmen's Bureau was pulling out of Louisville? The Bureau announced that it was leaving Kentucky in July 1868 and by the beginning of 1870, the Bureau was gone. Despite promises that their educational department would continue until the state provided public schools for the freedmen, political decisions made at the national level left this promise unfulfilled. In most parts of the South, the Freedmen's Bureau kept this promise to local communities and worked to transition their schools into the hands of local public school boards. Because of the rapid freedmen population increase and the loss of Freedmen's Bureau support, the educational needs of local black children were increasingly difficult to meet with existing private school ventures.<sup>31</sup>

Exacerbating the difficulty of creating increased educational opportunities for freedmen in Louisville was the weak legislative response by the Kentucky state government in the years following the war. In 1866, Kentucky's General Assembly enacted a law that allowed all property taxes "from Negroes and mulattos," as well as a tax of two dollars for African-American men over the age of eighteen, to become part of a fund, often casually referred to as the Negro or Colored Fund. The state earmarked half of the money for poor relief and the other half for the education of black children.<sup>32</sup>

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Lucas, 114-115; Yater, 108-109.

<sup>31</sup> *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 17, 1868; Green, 1-65.

<sup>32</sup> Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Volume 1 (Frankfort: S.I.M. Major, 1866).

After one year, this fund reported just over \$12,000 but the state spent less than \$4000 of its coffers, none of it on education. As reported by state Superintendent Zachary Smith in 1867, there was significant inaction on the part of many of the county trustees to provide education for black children due to racial prejudice. Most trustees interpreted the portion of the act stating that they “may cause a separate school to be taught in their district for the education of the Negro and mulatto children” to mean that creating such schools was optional. It said they “may” create the schools, not that they “shall” or “must” create them. Superintendent Smith regularly worked to establish public schools for blacks because he strongly believed that Kentucky’s freedmen needed to be “digested and assimilated” and public schools were vital headway in that direction.<sup>33</sup>

To encourage trustee compliance, the legislature created a second law regarding education for black children in 1867. This amended Negro Fund act encouraged the trustees in each county to set up separate schools for African-Americans in their districts with a minimum three-month school term. The state would pay \$2.50 to the district for each student that attended three months or more. As this new law did not expressly make the creation of black schools compulsory through its continued use of the word “may”— perhaps the hope had been that the promise of financing would override the aforementioned prejudice issues— not a single public school for black students was created anywhere in the state. Subsequent amendments to the Negro Fund that prioritized the funds use for poor relief exacerbated this lack of initiative. The early 1870s only saw the prospects of education for African-Americans

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<sup>33</sup> C.W. Hackensmith, *Out of Time and Tide: The Evolution of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970) 98.



in Kentucky diminish when, in 1871, the Negro Fund was dismantled leaving no funds for black education throughout the state. It was under such circumstances that the black population of Louisville worked to establish public schools.<sup>34</sup>

While Louisville African-Americans came out of the Civil War with a head start from their previously established private schools, Kentucky's status as a border state put them at a disadvantage. The Reconstruction Acts enacted by Congress in 1867 forced former Confederate states to rewrite their constitutions. Delegates at the constitutional conventions that followed wrote the creation of public schools systems for black children, as well as for whites in some states, into these new governing documents. As Kentucky never left the Union, Congress did not require that the state rework its constitution; as a result, public schools for African-Americans did not come to fruition before the Freedmen's Bureau left the state. In their absence, Kentucky's freedmen sought to find a path to public education on their own.<sup>35</sup>

The first attempts by Louisville African-Americans to agitate for public schools date back to 1865 when local black leadership held strategy meetings and some also began fundraising. In early 1866, many of these same leading African-Americans petitioned the state legislature for public schools controlled by African-Americans. Bolstered by the success of the Ely Normal School and unsatisfied with their increasingly overwhelmed private schools, leading local citizens regularly sent

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<sup>34</sup> *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of Kentucky for the School Year Ending December 31, 1867* (Frankfort: J.H. Harney, 1868) 277-278; Hackensmith, 98.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) 288-333; W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) 637-669.

petitions to the Louisville Board of Trustees of the Public Schools for the establishment of public schools for African-American children. As a point of reference, in 1869, Louisville's public schools for white children had eighteen facilities worth more than half a million dollars, granting the system more than sufficient stability to extend its services to children of the city's black citizens. Despite these efforts to get Louisville's local school board to create opportunities for black children, initially "no cognizance was taken" of these requests.<sup>36</sup>

Louisville's African-American leadership, led by William Gibson, worked with other black education advocates throughout the state to force progress. As previously mentioned, since the creation of the state's "Negro Fund" in 1866, Kentucky had been collecting additional taxes from African-Americans, two dollars for every black male over age eighteen, for black education and pauper support. With no action taken by any state or county entity to provide public education, African-Americans throughout Kentucky became increasingly resentful of taxes taken from them but not used for their appointed purpose. While local petitions and requests continued to be sent to the Louisville government and school board, in 1867, black leaders throughout the state joined together in Lexington for a convention in December 1867. Delegates at this meeting were not hopeful, as all reports coming in from around the state created a bleak vision for the future.<sup>37</sup>

By contrast, a second convention two years later was described by the press as a "radical jubilee". This Colored Educational Convention met in Louisville, in July 1869, over the course of three days. Despite all of the pageantry and marching bands,

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<sup>36</sup> Lucas, 229; *The Courier-Journal*, April 9, 1869; Weeden, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Lucas, 244-245.

Freedmen's Bureau Chief Benjamin Runkle's reminder that his organization's support would be gone within months placed the pressure for advancement squarely on African-Americans shoulders. This convention resolved to petition Congress for continued support, petition the state legislature to begin using their tax dollars for education as promised, and create a state educational society for colored schools. William Gibson became president of this board, accompanied by other Louisvillians in leadership positions. However, by the time of the next convention in August 1870, only fifty delegates attended (versus 250 in 1869). Declining prospects throughout the state and, interestingly, the imminent opening of black public schools in Louisville are to blame for this low turnout.<sup>38</sup>

While educational conditions for African-Americans in Kentucky looked increasingly dire, the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in February 1870 brought the franchise to all of the state's men regardless of race. In Kentucky, African-Americans never were denied access to the ballot, even after the failure of Reconstruction led to a loss of electoral power for blacks in most of the South. Throughout Kentucky, the African-American population was so small as to be a non-factor in elections, but this was not the case in Louisville. As previously stated, African-Americans lived in most of the cities wards and in some of the wards they were a high enough percentage of the population to be a factor in ward and city elections. The ability of African-Americans to impact local elections served as motivation for the city leadership and school board, whose members the voters

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<sup>38</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, July 15-16, 1869; Lucas, 245; Gibson, 69.

selected in ward-based elections, to begin favorably responding to local black agitation for public schools.<sup>39</sup>

Less than a month after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, the first step toward opening public schools for African-Americans in Louisville occurred when the city adopted a new charter, its third, in March of 1870. This charter mandated that all school taxes collected from African-Americans go into a separate fund used “for the educational benefit of the children of said African race.” In essence, this was a Negro Fund for city taxes in addition to the state Negro Fund.<sup>40</sup>

Technically, the new charter did not actually mark the official creation of public schools for African-Americans, much in the way Kentucky’s Negro Fund laws did not mandate the creation of education facilities. Fortunately, a few short weeks after the adoption of the new charter, on April 4, 1870, the Louisville School Board did resolve to create a committee on “African schools.” They selected a committee of five, known as the Committee on Colored Schools or the Colored School Committee, with John Pope serving as their chairman. This committee was to look into the amount of school taxes collected from the black community that would be available to support schools for African-American children.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, Henry Weeden’s historical account of the impetus for the creation of black public schools made no mention of the Fifteenth Amendment or the

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<sup>39</sup> Lucas, 245-246.

<sup>40</sup> Weeden, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Weeden, 22; Louisville School Board, Board Meeting Minutes, April 1870, August 1870. Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY.

new city charter. In his account, the Board of Trustees read a petition from “Marshall Woodson and others” during that same April 4 meeting. The meeting’s minutes confirm that the board read such a petition, but says nothing of the board’s reaction. Weeden says that the petition “greatly impressed” those present. As a result, he posits, they decided to create a committee to explore the subject of colored schools. It is unclear why this document garnered support when previous petitions and overtures had failed for years; perhaps a desire to please soon-to-be voters in their wards prompted the board to act on this petition. It is also interesting that the press coverage of this meeting also makes no mention of this petition. Still, it cannot be denied that the Board of Trustees read a petition calling for the creation of black public schools and then took action toward creating such schools.<sup>42</sup>

Many months later, at the September 1870 board meeting the Committee on Colored Schools presented their report. They estimated that between 1866 and 1870, African-Americans in Louisville paid \$4,628.85 in school taxes. Then they recommended, “That on the first of October two schools for the colored people shall be opened...and as soon thereafter as a suitable place can be obtained, another school shall be opened making three in all.” In each school, there would be three teachers, with one of them also serving as principle. They projected that the cost of supporting these three schools would be \$3,500 for the 1870-1871 schools year.<sup>43</sup>

There is no clear resolution or vote presented in the minutes, but since the next board meeting’s minutes dealt with teacher assignments and budgets for the colored

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<sup>42</sup> Weeden, 22; Louisville School Board, Board Meeting Minutes, April 1870; *The Courier-Journal*, April 5, 1870.

<sup>43</sup> Louisville School Board, Board Meeting Minutes, September 22, 1870.

schools, the September 22, 1870, board meeting appears to be the official commitment to create public schools for Louisville's black children. Press coverage the following day also lacked pomp and circumstance, simply relaying this historic news in general coverage of the meeting, which included such momentous items like, "Resolved, that no teacher shall be permitted to send a child away from school on account of not having the 'Golden Robin,' or any other bird." Unfortunately, the historical record gives no sense of the reaction from Louisville's African-American population. There was no local black paper at this time and even the two African-American contemporaries who wrote on this topic, Henry Weeden and William Gibson, fail to give any indication of what celebrations may have ensued. Notably absent from the creation of public schools for African-American children was any outcry or resistance from the white community. One possible explanation for why there was no resistance in Louisville is that the health of the city's economy did not require the labor of African-American children. Whites and blacks living in such close quarters in the city's wards also promoted a preference for educated black youth.<sup>44</sup>

While the Fifteenth Amendment's ratification, the new city charter, and a petition from the black community all played a role in the timing of the creation of public schools for black children, it was the three aforementioned forces at work in Louisville that contributed to this important progress for African-American education in Louisville. The first was the rapidly growing African-American population in Louisville, the second was the closure of the Kentucky branch of the Freedmen's Bureau, and the last was the rising protest and organization of local African-

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<sup>44</sup> Louisville School Board, Board Meeting Minutes, September 22, 1870, October 3, 1870; *The Courier-Journal*, September 23, 1870; Anderson, 23.

Americans around the issue. These three factors, when combined with the positive outcomes in the city's history of educating black children in private institutions, made a strong case for the white school board to support public schooling for African-Americans. The concept that whites would support black education because they viewed it as a sound investment in creating better workers and citizens is widely accepted by historians, but so is a more cynical position that whites viewed black education as an opportunity to keep African-Americans subordinate or controlled. It seems that both perspectives could be at play in the Louisville Board's decision to create schools for the city's African-American children. However, evidence for the more contemptuous position comes from an Annual Report of Public Schools in 1872. In a section focused on the colored schools and the need to expand their offering for black students, the report said, "Much trouble is already experienced on account of their general ignorance, and unless active and persistent efforts are made for their mutual improvement, the next generation will be little if any better qualified to exercise properly the rights of freedmen."<sup>45</sup>

### **The First Years of Louisville's Public Colored Schools, 1870-1872**

In the fall of 1870, Louisville opened its first public schools for African-Americans. This launch had mixed results. On the positive end, the Committee on Public Colored Schools created a system where black classrooms followed the same curriculum and guidelines as the city's white schools and African-Americans held

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<sup>45</sup> Anderson, 80, 92, 145; Ward M. McAfee, *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) 9-10; Louisville School Board, Annual Report, June 30, 1872.

positions of authority. Both the larger Louisville School Board and the Colored School Committee responded to the needs and concerns of the black schools. On the negative side, in facilities and feeling the first black public schools too closely mirrored the private schools they were supposed to be replacing. Funding concerns also plagued the first years of the new black schools.

The first two schools opened on October 1, 1870, as scheduled. The first school operated out of Fifth Street Baptist Church and the second at the Center Street African Methodist Church. The school board located the third school in the Jackson Street Church, which opened later that fall. All of these churches already housed thriving private schools, so this was simply a conversion from private to public funding, as opposed to creating schools from scratch. The schools initially held the illustrious titles of Number One, Number Two, and Number Three. As planned, each of the three schools had three faculty members apiece, with one serving as principal. The number of enrolled students that first year was at 712 with the average daily attendance hovering at just over 500. The student-teacher ratio was one teacher to 57 students. Other sources give the number of African-American students attending school that year at almost 1200, which includes those students still attending private schools.<sup>46</sup>

As stipulated by the “Rules Governing the Ward Schools”, the same practices and regulations governed these first three black schools as the local white schools, including the same grade system, textbooks, and ages of eligibility (six to twenty). The only exception made for the black schools was that they were required to have a

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<sup>46</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 23, 1870; Weeden, 23; Wilson, 22.



minimum sixty students per teacher ratio, higher than for white students, but there is no record of this being enforced. The Committee on Colored Schools placed qualified teachers in the new schools. All nine teachers received certification from the Board of Trustees after an examination and received their “pro-rata of the public colored school fund.” From the start these black public schools, while segregated in separate facilities, were a part of the Louisville school system, not part of a separate school system. Relative to other southern schools in this era, it is extraordinary that Louisville’s black public schools even had the same school-year calendar, let alone the same curriculum.<sup>47</sup>

Oversight and control of the city’s colored public schools continued to lie in the hands of the Colored School Committee once the schools opened. As a branch of the larger city board of education, all of its members were white. However, African-Americans received positions of authority in the new black public schools. The faculty at the schools was overwhelmingly African-American. All three of the new schools had African-American principals and only one teacher, out of all nine, was white. It seems significant that this white teacher, Florence Murrow, answered to Mrs. E. Stansberry who was African-American. The thirty-year history of African-Americans teaching students in the city’s private schools surely played a role in the maintenance of this tradition by the Committee on Public Colored Schools. African-American faculty continued to dominate the staffs of black city schools through desegregation in the 1950s. The city’s utilization of black faculty and administrators stands in stark

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<sup>47</sup> “Rules Governing Ward Schools: Public Colored Schools.” Louisville School Board, Annual School Board Report, 1871-1872; Louisville School Board, Board Minutes June 30, 1870; *The Courier-Journal*, September 6, 1870.

contrast to the experiences of other urban African-American public schools. The black communities in Richmond and Mobile expressed preferences for African-American faculty, but most of the faculty in the schools were white. This circumstance was a direct result of the large role northern missionary organizations played in the staffing and administration of those schools. This makes the fact that African-American principals headed Louisville's black public schools even more extraordinary. Without the history of black administration and faculty in the city's African-American private schools, it is doubtful people of color would have had so much agency in the public school system.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps even more significant than the leadership of black teachers in the new public schools was the creation of the Colored Advisory Board, alternately called the Board of Visitors. This committee included nine African-American men from the Louisville community selected by the Committee on Public Colored Schools. The responsibilities of this board were broad. They visited the schools and reported their findings to the Colored School Committee. They examined the strength of the faculty and facilities during these visits. They also had a role in determining if applicants for jobs in the public schools were of the proper moral character. To be sure, all of the decision-making authority was in the hands of the white board to which they answered, but the Colored Advisory Board did regularly exert its influence. For instance, for black school faculty to receive their payroll, both the Committee on Public Colored Schools and the Colored Advisory Board signed the principal's reports. This author is unaware of another public school system in the South where

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<sup>48</sup> Weeden, 23; <sup>48</sup> "Rules Governing Ward Schools: Public Colored Schools." Louisville School Board, Annual School Board Report, 1871-1872; Green, 1-66.

African-Americans maintained so much influence over their schools after they transitioned to public funding.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the positives surrounding the city's creation of public schools for African-American children, a major issue was how closely they resembled the private schools they were replacing. While they appreciated that the faculties of their three schools were heavily African-American, the black community objected to the housing of all three schools in churches. Even T.K. Noble, the Freedmen's Bureau's Superintendent of Education in Kentucky noted that, "The places of worship owned by the colored people are almost the only available school houses in the State." This might have been acceptable had the churches' facilities been up to standard, but it would seem that all classrooms were located in the churches' basements. The city's African-American community did not consider them appropriate public school facilities. As described by Weeden, "The progress of the children was as good as could be expected considering the unfavorable circumstances in which they were placed." Elsewhere, it was common for school boards to house African-American public schools in black churches. Often communities preferred these accommodations to spaces the school boards were willing to provide.<sup>50</sup>

It is to the Colored School Committee's credit that they resolved this issue quickly. Chairman John Pope secured rental of the schoolhouse at Fourteenth and

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<sup>49</sup> Despite the creation of this Board of Visitors during the 1870-1871 school year, the Board did not appoint anyone to serve until the summer of 1871. Weeden, 23; "Rules Governing Ward Schools: Public Colored Schools." Louisville School Board, Annual School Board Report, 1871-1872.

<sup>50</sup> John Alvord. *Semi-Annual Report on the Schools for Freedmen, Third* (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government Printing Office, 1868); Weeden, 23.

Broadway, formerly the Ely Normal School. Since this was a large facility built specifically for education, the board consolidated all three African-American schools in this building. When school began in the fall of 1871, this combined school would have one principal and seven teachers. It is somewhat strange that this school never received a proper name. Many sources simply refer to it as the school on Fourteenth and Broadway; within a few years, it went by the name of Western Colored School.<sup>51</sup>

While renting the old Ely building solved the facility problem, the larger problem of funding occupied the attention of the Colored School Board during the 1871-1872 school year. According to Louisville's 1870 city charter, when African-Americans paid city school taxes the monies would go to a separate fund, "such fund to be used alone for the educational benefit of the children of said African race." As previously stated, the colored school fund began with approximately \$4600, based on five years of school taxes accumulated from 1866-1870 and some funds from the state; in its first school year, the base expenditures for the three schools was \$3500. More money obviously had to be raised. With a mind toward finding a solution, John Pope, chair of the Committee on Colored Schools, proposed to the Board in late 1871 that all taxes, not just school taxes, paid by local black citizens go towards the Colored School Fund for a period of five years. Pope and his colleagues were adamant that black schools only have funding from the African-American community.<sup>52</sup>

The Board of Trustees of the Public Schools supported this funding plan and sent it to Louisville's city government. The city's General Council passed a resolution

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<sup>51</sup> Weeden, 24.

<sup>52</sup> Weeden, 22-24; *The Courier-Journal*, December 12, 1871; *Daily Louisville Commercial*, October 22, 1972.

to implement the Board's petition, but Mayor John Baxter vetoed the measure, believing that such a decision would leave the city vulnerable to future demands from other minority groups. Mayor Baxter argued that the solution was simply to use white tax dollars to bridge the funding gap for black education. The school board did not agree with this interpretation of the city charter. The board interpreted "such fund to be used alone for the educational benefit of the children of said African race" to mean that no other tax funding (i.e., white taxes) could be used to support black schools, while the mayor interpreted the phrase to mean that school taxes collected from African-Americans could not be used for any other purpose. Ultimately, the mayor's interpretation carried the day and taxes collected by whites supported black schools moving forward. However, in the Committee on Public Colored Schools annual report to the larger board for the 1871-1872 school year, concern over this issue persisted. They reported that general revenue funds were going toward black education and that the larger board should create a plan to end this practice to free them from "a burden that is becoming embarrassing."<sup>53</sup>

The fact that the committee was using general school funds to support the black schools remained unpalatable even to those charged with running those schools. However, it is significant to note that Louisville's school board never subjected their black citizens to the double taxation that blacks experienced throughout the South. Louisville's African-Americans paid their school taxes and nothing more. They never filled funding gaps with personal donations or their labor to create improved facilities

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<sup>53</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, December 12, 1871; *Daily Louisville Commercial*, October 22, 1972; Weeden, 23-24; Louisville School Board, Annual Report, June 30, 1872.

or to provide school supplies. Moving forward, the Committee on Colored Schools generally sustained a commitment to maintaining the schools for African-Americans that were comparable their white counterparts, while also striving to improve and expand facilities for the growing number of African-American students. However, despite the many merits of the Louisville public school system for African-Americans, instances of discrimination—especially over funding— pervaded the system for decades to come.<sup>54</sup>

In the final analysis, the first two years of public schools for African-Americans gleaned more positive than negative results. From the outset, the administration of the black schools resembled their white counterparts. The use of common curriculum and regulations from the outset cannot be undervalued. The agency given to African-Americans as authority figures through faculty positions and the Colored Advisory Board gave credit to the past successes of black private schools and gave the black community influence over the education of their children. Taxation and funding issues aside, the Committee on Public Colored Schools set black schools up for success and actively troubleshoot problems when they emerged. The move from three church-basement schools to a superior rental facility within only one school year stands as testament to this fact. These accomplishments certainly shine brighter when one recognizes that the state of Kentucky had not yet made provisions for the education of African-Americans and it would be decades before proper public

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<sup>54</sup> Anderson, 154-159.

elementary education would become available to most African-Americans in the rest of the South.<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From their successful launch of private educational institutions through their ability to retain an influence in their schools once they became public, Louisville's African-American community is unique among its Southern peers. As an urban center in a border state, Louisville stood to gain from certain advantages as much as it had to struggle to overcome unique obstacles.

Moving forward, the first few decades of Louisville's African-American public schools saw more mixed results. The schools continued to be superior to most of their southern counterparts, continued to utilize black faculty and principals, and saw an expansion of services for African-American students including the addition of kindergarten and high schools courses in a time when they were not available to most white students in the South. However, they also saw a dramatic disparity in the quality of their facilities, an increase in inequities for black faculty, and a decline in black leadership in the school system.

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<sup>55</sup> Anderson, 148.

### Chapter 3

## THE EARLY YEARS OF LOUISVILLE'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 1872-1902

### Introduction

The rapid turnover between the launch of public schools for African-Americans in Louisville in 1870 in three church basements and the consolidation of those schools into a more suitable facility in 1871 foreshadowed the swift pace of growth Louisville's black schools would experience in the late nineteenth century. While the proportion of African-American school-aged children attending school throughout the South would fall during this period, Louisville's system grew so rapidly that overcrowding was a near constant problem. The Colored School Committee's efforts to cope with this growth sometimes resulted in windfalls, as when they received a large sum of money to build three relatively lavish school buildings for African-Americans, but typically resulted in scant funding for inferior facilities. However, the condition of even the worst schools for African-Americans in Louisville was generally far superior to those in the rest of Kentucky. Despite the creation of a state public school system in 1874 and court cases ruled in their favor on issues of funding equality, African-Americans in Kentucky struggled for decades to find a modicum of the progress made in Louisville.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Horace Mann Bond argues that the condition of black schools in the South in 1900 was the same as in 1875. Between 1880 and 1900, the number of black school age children increased by 25% but the proportion attending school fell.



While Louisville's black schools were superior to most throughout the South, rating the success of the first three decades of public schools in Louisville is difficult. While it is admirable that the system always utilized black faculty, this period saw a decline in black leadership in the system and a reluctance to correct inequities in pay and workload compared to white faculty in white schools. However, this period also saw an expansion of services for African-American students, including high school courses and kindergartens, which were not even available at this time for most white students throughout the United States.

### **Rapid Growth and Growing Pains**

Rapid growth characterized the first three decades of public education for African-American children in Louisville. Between 1870 and 1900, the city's African-American population skyrocketed from about 15,000 to over 39,000. During this same period, Louisville created eleven public schools for African-American children to meet the rising demand. The Colored School Committee worked diligently to secure facilities and funding for the new black schools. Initially, the committee achieved great success, securing a large sum of money from the Kentucky state government that went toward the construction of three high-quality school buildings for African-Americans. The entire Louisville community celebrated the openings of these schools and the overall advancement of education for the black children of Louisville. In fact, there is no documented white resistance to this progress. However, as growth in

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Horace Mann Bond, *Education of the Negro in the American Social Order* (New York : Octagon Books,1934) 115.

African-American city schools skyrocketed and funds grew scarce, it became clear that white students remained the priority of the larger Louisville board of education. Over time, the lavish school buildings became a thing of the past, and the solutions to overcrowded black schools were found in rental facilities, branch schools, and the occasional new, but basic, school building. While never explicitly stated by the larger board, the fact that white taxpayers were carrying the majority of the cost of the African-American schools, in addition to the social mores of this period, played a role in their prioritization of white over black schools.<sup>57</sup>

The 1871 consolidation of all three black public schools to the former Ely facility was a great improvement from the previous, church-basement conditions. However, the end of year report from the Colored Advisory Board (or Board of Visitors) for 1871-1872 raised concerns about the new school's location. As it was in the western section of town (in fact, it would later be given the name of Western Colored School), students from the eastern part of the city found it nearly impossible to attend. The Committee on Colored Schools immediately responded to the Board of Visitor's request and moved to secure a second proper facility. This school, known as Eastern Colored School, opened in the fall of 1872 in a rented building at Chesnut and Campbell Streets.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hollis Ralph Lynch (ed.), *The Black Urban Condition: A Documentary History, 1866-1971* (New York: Crowell, 1973) appendix A 421-428.

<sup>58</sup> Louisville School Board, Board Report, June 30, 1972. Jefferson County Public School Archives, Louisville, KY; Weeden, 24; *Daily Louisville Commercial*, August 24, 1872.

Since “the people showed much avidity to take advantage of the opportunity afforded them by the establishment of the schools,” both Eastern and the larger consolidated school were at capacity almost immediately. In early 1873, the Colored School Board began the search for a third rented facility, while simultaneously working with Kentucky’s Legislature to secure more funds for the colored schools. The procurement of those funds took a peculiar course. In 1870, the state allowed Louisville to sell bonds to fund Male High School, Female High School, and other white public schools; the city’s sinking fund then paid the principal and interest charges. Three years later, the Kentucky state legislature freed Louisville of these payments and said the money could go to new schools for the city’s African-Americans. With this new legislation, the Louisville School Board of Trustees received over \$60,000 from the state and purchased three lots on which to build three new schoolhouses. This was an interesting move by the Kentucky state legislature, as they had done virtually nothing to fund black education throughout the state. It is, therefore, possible to imagine that the Colored School Committee petitioned the state for more funding and this fortuitous turn of events was the result of those efforts.<sup>59</sup>

The Committee on Colored Schools went to work selecting the first site and, in doing so, roused the first recorded public resistance to black public education in Louisville. They selected a site at Sixth and York streets for the new school, only a block away from a white school at Fifth and York. *The Courier-Journal* reported the projected school location on April 8 and in the following days, the paper published letters to the editor voicing opposition to this location. The complaints focused on the

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<sup>59</sup> Weeden, 24-25.

proximity of a black school to the existing white school, and the belief it would “lead to daily collision between the two races.” In a true foreshadowing of the residential segregation that would come to a boil in Louisville in the next century, the paper said that the people of Louisville “don’t care where the house is built, so [long as] it is not in their neighborhood”. The authors of these editorials were clear that it was not the education of the black children they opposed, but the location of the school. The board then selected a new site, centrally located at Sixth and Kentucky streets, to house the first colored school facility in the state built with public funds at a cost of \$32,000.<sup>60</sup>

The erection of Central Colored School in 1873 set a precedent for building future colored schools in areas of Louisville that had a concentration of black citizens; the school’s very name was an indicator of the board’s intentions. This precedent was a simple extension of the long-standing policy of distributing Louisville’s white public schools throughout the city’s wards. In fulfilling the order for three new schools, Eastern Colored School moved from its rental facility to a new school building in 1874 and Western Colored School (previously housed in the old Ely building) became the final building erected under this initiative in 1875.<sup>61</sup>

All three of these schools held impressive dedication ceremonies and were truly the high point of progress for Louisville’s African-American schools in this period. When Central Colored School held its dedication ceremony on October 7, 1873, the local press described the building as “costly and well-appointed” and “a

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<sup>60</sup> Weeden, 24-25; *The Courier-Journal*, February 5, 1873; April 8-11, 1873; Anne Braden, *The Wall Between* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio* (Louisville, 1979) 110.

monument to the liberal policy pursued by our municipal authorities.” The September 1874 dedication ceremony for Eastern Colored School was also a festive affair. The keynote speaker was Horace Morris, a member of the Colored Board of Visitors, who expressed the local black community’s pride in their schools.

As Kentuckians, we feel proud—aye, a little bit vain—over the beautiful buildings you have erected for us, for nowhere else in the country...are such magnificent buildings to be found and nowhere else, excepting no locality, are they so complete in all their appointments, in all the requirements, the necessary furniture, etc., as here.<sup>62</sup>

*The Courier-Journal* described the opening of Western Colored School the following year on September 2, 1875, as one of the largest gatherings in the city’s history with many leading citizens in attendance. Western Colored School at Magazine and Fifteenth streets was a twelve-room building that included a chapel. It had “all the modern improvements for a well ventilated school building, capable of comfortably accommodating six hundred pupils.” While the school did not cost as much as Central Colored School, coming in at almost half its cost at \$18,000, the press did point out that this new building was a better value for the money.<sup>63</sup>

While all three of these schools deserve the praised poured on them, the construction of these fine facilities would not be the typical for African-American schools in Louisville. After this promising start with three large, well-built schools,

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<sup>62</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 4, 1874.

<sup>63</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 3, 1875.

most African-American schools in the next decade were rental facilities or basic school buildings. For instance, the very same year that Central opened, a rental facility opened as Portland Colored School. It disappointed in both pupil attendance and the condition of the building. A few years later, Portland would move into a simple, but newly built, one-story schoolhouse. Fulton Street Colored School was another school housed in a rental facility when it opened in 1874. When it did get a permanent home three years later, the construction was on a flood plain and in 1883, a flood washed the building completely off its foundation. The school board decided it was better to sell the land than to rebuild the school at that location. One of the worst reported rentals was a property on Lafayette Street that opened during the 1886-1887 school year in the eastern section of the city. This particular neighborhood had a poor reputation and the board believed it was a bad influence on the schoolchildren. An inspection of the rented building showed it was poorly lit and very cramped. In the mid-1880s, a reporter from the New York publication *Freeman* wrote about extreme overcrowding in Louisville public schools. According to the article, the student-teacher ratio could be as high as 120 students to a single teacher, and that students had to take turns using desks.<sup>64</sup>

The poor condition of many of the schools was not lost on the Colored School Committee, who regularly fought and petitioned the larger school board for better accommodations for the African-American schools. They managed to leverage the

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<sup>64</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 23, 1873; November 2, 1887; February 8, 1887; March 8, 1887; George D. Wilson, *A Century of Negro Education in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville: Louisville Municipal College, 1941) 162; *New York Freeman*, October 17, 1885.

terrible conditions at Lafayette to get funding for a new twelve-room building on the east end of town and a nine-room addition at Western Colored School. This expansion actually made Western the largest black school in the United States at that time with twenty-two classrooms. However, the growth of Louisville's black public schools continued and these buildings did little to relieve the congestion. Moving forward, more rental facilities, additions to existing schools, and the occasional new school building served the growing educational needs of the city's African-Americans. However, most of the new schools built came in at a cost around \$5000, which pales in comparison to the previous lavish spending on Central, Western, and Eastern when first constructed. Still, despite the Colored School Committee's efforts, so severe was the overcrowding that in 1899 a public school opened in a private home. Sometimes the Colored School Committee employed creative solutions, as when a white school at Ninth and Magazine switched facilities with Central Colored School at Sixth and Kentucky. The driving force behind this decision was to get white students into the superior Central facility, but they could justify the move because the inferior white school facility was larger and Central did need more classroom space. By the end of the century, there were over 5,000 students and eleven schools devoted to education for African-Americans.<sup>65</sup>

While the Colored School Committee regularly worked to improve the schools in their charge, the larger Louisville School Board of Trustees did not make them a priority; this becomes more understandable (in the context of the times) when one

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<sup>65</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, January 5, 1886; March 8 1887; June 7, 1887; July 3, 1888; September 6, 1888; February 1, 1883; February 2, 1892; February 7, 1892; April 27, 1893; July 8, 1894; Wilson, 163.

understands the general financial situation of the African-American schools. As discussed in the previous chapter, the original plan to have African-Americans school taxes as the sole source of income for the colored schools was unsustainable. Despite some controversy over the interpretation of the city's charter, the mayor's opinion, that black school funding could come from white taxes, ruled the day. In 1873 alone, only two thousand dollars came from the colored school fund while three thousand came from white school taxes to pay for African-American schools. In effect, white citizens were paying more than African-Americans were for the black public schools.<sup>66</sup>

Rising costs related to the rapid growth of the schools would only continue. The following year's receipt for African-American school taxes was \$3319 while the salaries for their teachers came in at just over \$14,000; this figure does not even include facility costs. By the conclusion of the 1875-1876 school year, the total tax deficit for the first six years of black public schools was \$37,195. There is no record of any public outcry regarding the use of white tax dollars for these schools, nor any discussion of cutting back services. This stated imbalance continued until new Kentucky state law in 1882 equalized state funding for black and white students after a federal court deemed their separate school funds unconstitutional. This legal change only affected Louisville's practices in that there was no longer a separate colored school fund for the city's African-Americans or reports on how much they paid in school taxes relative to spending on their schools. However, even though legally all of the money was then in the same pot, the assumption would continue to be that

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<sup>66</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, Oct 28 1873.



African-Americans were getting more for their schools than they themselves contributed. The amount of money spent per pupil did not equalize either due to the continued underpayment of black faculty. For example, the amount spent per pupil on black teacher salaries was \$13.01 apiece while it was slightly higher at \$14.87 for white teachers.<sup>67</sup>

The overwhelming sense one receives from this narrative is that the Committee on Colored Public Schools steadfastly provided educational facilities and opportunities for their African-American students. They responded to the black community's concerns about facilities and worked to find necessary funding. However, never was there a sense that the larger Louisville School Board of Trustees believed the black schools should equal the city's white facilities. Quality deemed appropriate for black students, as opposed to equality, was the primary concern. However, George Brown, speaking at the 1875 dedication of Western Colored School in his capacity as the chairman of the Colored Board of Visitors, would disagree. He stated that, "To make our schools the equal of any common school in the land, we have the undivided support of the Board of Trustees". Time and experience would not support his hopeful assertion.<sup>68</sup>

### **The Struggle for African-American Education in Kentucky**

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<sup>67</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 2, 1891; Sept 7, 1875; Aug 8 1876; William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011) 89.

<sup>68</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 3, 1875.

While achieving quality education for black children in Louisville was challenging, any issues in the city's system seem like high-class problems compared to the obstacles faced by African-Americans elsewhere in Kentucky. While the state created a public school system for black children in 1874 that led to the establishment of hundreds of schools for African-Americans, various problems led to dramatic inequalities between black and white schools. Funding for Kentucky's African-American students was dramatically lower than for its white students, and even court rulings demanding the equalization of monies for students regardless of race did not solve the problem. Unequal facilities and budgets would persist throughout Kentucky for decades.

The years between the end of Freedmen's Bureau support in 1870 and the creation of public schools for African-Americans at the state level in 1874 were extremely difficult as most of their schools, included those supported by local churches, closed their doors. It was not until February 1874 that the General Assembly revived the previously dropped issue of funding schools for African-American children. Black leadership in the state had been clear in 1873 that they would file a lawsuit unless the legislature created public schools for African-Americans in their next session.<sup>69</sup> While he made no mention of the pending lawsuit, H.A.M. Henderson, Kentucky's Superintendent for education from 1871-1879, gave his recommendation on the creation of a school system for the state's African-American children and the issue of finding a means to pay for them:

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<sup>69</sup> Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Kentucky Historical Society, 2003) 254.

After a long subjection to servitude, the colored people have suddenly been elevated to the franchises of American citizenship. Whatever view we may entertain of the propriety of the amendment...we should deal with it as a practical problem, pressing upon us for its proper solution...I presume that candid men of all parties will agree that the mixing of the races in the common schools would dismember the system; yet the colored people ask that something be done for them to aid in the education of their children and we should not be so imbecile as to dismiss their entreaty without even thinking...what might be done for them without injury to whites. I am opposed to a division of the present [white] school fund. It is already inadequate to the establishment of such schools as we require among the whites. Its further distribution to...colored pupil children...would seriously injure the white children without correspondingly benefiting the blacks. In many counties the amount received by the colored people would be totally inadequate to the support of a single school, as the black population is so sparse in many sections of our State [sic]...No blow could be struck to our school system more fatal to its interests than legislation which would lessen the pro rata which each white pupil is now receiving...We have thought over the whole question patiently, and have discovered nothing better to recommend than this: Give all the taxes paid by colored citizens to the education of their children.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, the state superintendent recommended the very course of action, allocating all taxes collected from African-Americans for their education, which the mayor of Louisville rejected a few years prior. The Kentucky Legislature,

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<sup>70</sup> Barksdale Hamlett, "History of Education in Kentucky" *Bulletin of the Kentucky Department of Education* 7, no. 4 (July 1914).

taking the advice of their superintendent, on February 24, 1874, passed “An Act Establishing a Uniform System of Public Schools for Colored Children of the State”, creating a uniform system of black schools. This would be a completely separate system from the state’s public white schools; in Louisville, black and white schools both fell under one system. The legislature also designated for those schools virtually all varieties of state taxes levied on colored citizens. This fund was separate from white school funds and the amount of money spent per black student could never exceed spending on a white student, nor could any white taxes go to support the black school system. The use of white taxes for black schools was a necessity for maintaining quality black schools in Louisville. Fortunately, Louisville had an independent school system and was not bound to these regulations. Despite all of the inequities, the only aspect of this funding scheme that received any push back was a poll tax levied against black citizens for black schools—one-dollar tax for black males over age twenty-one— which did not exist for whites. However, arguments gained little traction with the state government who were quick to point out that African-Americans’ taxes did nothing to support the rest of the state’s government; they only supported schools for their community.<sup>71</sup>

State commissioners took a census of the states’ African-American children and reported 37,414 scholars eligible for public schooling. The property taxes collected amounted to \$18,707, spreading the funds to a thin fifty cents per student. By

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<sup>71</sup> C.W. Hackensmith, *Out of Time and Tide: The Evolution of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970) Tide 98-99; Frank L. McVey, *The Gates Open Slowly: A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1949) 148; Lucas, 255.

comparison, Louisville was budgeting that about twenty dollars per student, per annum. Under the state system of black schools, the school day was to be as long as that of a white school, but the standards were lower in black schools for teacher certification requirements and curriculum. The age of eligible schoolchildren, ages six to twenty for whites, was limited to students ages six to sixteen for black pupils. In Louisville, the age of eligibility was equal from the outset. In general, despite these differences, Superintendent Henderson reported that the colored school system “was modeled after the white system”. This law did result in progress for public education for African-Americans; ninety-three counties organized 452 black school districts in the first year alone.<sup>72</sup>

While the 1874 Kentucky state legislation’s “Act Establishing a Uniform System of Public Schools for Colored Children of the State” did bring about tangible results, black leaders deemed this progress inadequate and in a convention in 1875, they passed a number of resolutions aimed to equalize the black and white school systems. A major source of the inequities was the low pro rata for black students versus white students. Another convention held four years later pointed out the continued funding discrepancies; for instance, the average annual salary for a teacher in Kentucky’s black schools was a mere fifty dollars a year. This was about a third of what teachers made in black schools in other Southern states. It was also one seventh of what the lowest seniority teachers in Louisville were paid.<sup>73</sup> State Superintendent

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<sup>72</sup> Weeden, 26; Hackensmith, 99; Hamlett, 137-145; Edwina Ann Doyle, ed., *From the Fort to the Future: Educating the Children of Kentucky* (Lexington: Kentucky Images, 1987) 116.

<sup>73</sup> Doyle, 116-120.

Henderson's successor as of 1879, Joseph D. Pickett, gave support to the charge to equalize the aforementioned differences between the white and black systems:

In the System of Colored Schools, the range of school age, the length of school terms, the course of study, and the qualifications of teachers should correspond with those of the System of White Schools. This would be wise and just. Or, in other words, all the pupil-children of the Commonwealth should enjoy equal privileges for preparing an intelligent citizenship.<sup>74</sup>

However, it was not Pickett's support, but an 1882 federal court case that forced the state legislature to solve the inequities in the 1874 legislation. The state had lost *Kentucky v. Jesse Ellis*, which focused on the unconstitutionality of the additional poll tax on African-Americans to fund their separate school system. State leadership put the solution in the hands of the voters, who could choose to close all public schools, integrate all public schools, or equalize funding for white and black students. The voters overwhelmingly voted to accept a small school tax increase to equalize funding, though the referendum did force African-Americans with the franchise to vote for segregated schools. This law also included an increase in the age of eligible black students to match that of white students; this was a change from six to sixteen years old up to six and twenty (Louisville school eligibility was always equalized).<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Hamlett, 155.

<sup>75</sup> Hackensmith, 100-101; Doyle, 116-117; McVey, 148; Ellis, 89; Lucas, 261.

Despite this equalization in funding per student as paid to the county school systems, it was the physical separation of the schools that led to the greatest inequality between the dual systems— facilities. The African-American population in most small towns and rural areas was often thin; correspondingly, the small number of black schoolchildren meant that little more than a one-room school constructed for their education. Extreme overcrowding was the norm throughout the state, though that was also the case in Louisville where far more funding went to black schools. A black school in Lexington measured only twenty square feet while reporting a student body of ninety. So while funding for black and white students had been equalized (per pupil spending for black students nearly doubled from fifty-eight cents to \$1.30 overnight), population issues, and local racist policies, contributed to continued educational inequalities throughout the state.<sup>76</sup>

A major source of the problem was that while the state legislature equalized school funding distribution in 1882, local taxes and policies could remain unequal. Only Louisville and Paducah distributed local taxes to black and white students relatively equally. In Owensboro, Edward Claybrook and others sued the city over insufficient funding for its African-American schools. The suit was taking place while the state was changing its policies at the legislative levels but, as mentioned above, would only affect state funding per student. In Owensboro, local taxes remained unequal with white taxes going only to white schools. As a result, white children had two well-built schools, eighteen teachers, and a minimum nine-month school session, while African American children in Owensboro had one inferior school, three

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<sup>76</sup> Hackensmith, 100-101; Doyle, 116-117; McVey, 148; Ellis, 89.

teachers, and a school session of about three months. In 1883, U. S. Circuit Judge John Barr ruled that this local discrimination was not permissible. "If I am correct in my conclusion," he wrote, "All that colored children in Owensboro are entitled to is the equal protection of the laws, in that a fair share of this fund be applied toward the maintenance of the common schools especially provided for colored children. In this view the only remedy is in equity." Despite this ruling and the state equalization of funds the year before, it was 1934 before a new state school code banned separate collection and distribution of white and black taxes to schools and abolished separate white and black school systems. Other problems persisted as well. For instance, it was not until 1894 that the state equalized teacher certification requirements for black and white teachers. While certification requirements in Louisville were identical for both black and white faculty, African-Americans in leadership positions in the Louisville school system faced significant challenges during the early years of black public education.<sup>77</sup>

### **Challenges for African-American Leadership**

In addition to increasing problems with funding and overcrowded schools in the late nineteenth century, African-Americans in positions of leadership in the city's schools would also encounter challenges during this period. The Colored Advisory Board, which had both substantive and superficial duties relating to Louisville's black schools, met its end with no clear reason in the historical record for its demise. African-American principals and teachers also struggled to receive fairness in terms of

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<sup>77</sup> Ellis, 89; Hackensmith, 100-2; McVey, 149-150.



pay, class size, and the relief of teaching duties for principals. Lastly, the Committee on Colored Schools was dissolved in 1893.

When George Brown gave his speech praising the new schools and the work of the city school board at the 1875 dedication of Western Colored School, he had no way of knowing that the Colored Board of Visitors was not long for this world. From their inception, the Colored Advisory Board, or Board of Visitors, played a significant role in the early development of Louisville's African-American schools. In addition to their supervisory duties, the Board of Visitors often gave recommendations to which the Committee on Public Colored Schools responded favorably. The rental and subsequent construction of Eastern Colored School in 1872 is but one example. When the local black community objected to the location of a new school in 1874, the Board of Visitors convinced the Committee on Colored Schools to change sites. Additionally, the Board of Visitors served as the public face of the new African-American schools. At the fanfare dedications of Eastern and Western Colored Schools, leaders of the Colored Board of Visitors were the events' main speakers. So vital was their work that the Colored School Committee expanded their membership from nine to twelve members in 1874.<sup>78</sup>

Given this information, it comes as a surprise that the Committee on Public Colored Schools recommended the dissolution of the Colored Board of Visitors in June 1881, and the Board then instantly disappears from the historical record. What happened? The surviving documents provide three different versions of why the Board of Visitors met its end.

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<sup>78</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, March 10, 1874; September 4, 1874; September 3, 1875; April 7, 1874; May 5, 1874.

The first variation of the story comes from the local press. On June 7, 1881, the Committee on Colored Schools recommended an end to the Colored Board of Visitors. The reason stated was that the black public schools and their teachers no longer needed the additional supervision of the Board of Visitors. Since the schools functioned well for more than a decade, there may have been merit in this perspective. From here on out, the Committee on Public Colored Schools carried the administrative burden themselves. However, the other two narratives give strong support to the notion that the Colored Advisory Board had fallen out of favor with the local African-American community. If that was the case, it makes sense for the Colored School Committee to simply remove the Board of Visitors rather than risk also becoming alienated from the black community.<sup>79</sup>

The second rendition of the Board of Visitor's termination comes from William H. Gibson's historical sketch. He recounts that the source of the Board of Visitors' demise was in response to complaints from Louisville's African-American community. As previously recounted, education for black students in Louisville originated out of private efforts driven by local African-American churches and, according to Gibson, the Colored Advisory Board carried their denominational views into their duties for the public schools.<sup>80</sup> After a number of public meetings, a group of local African-Americans sent a petition to the white school board:

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<sup>79</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, June 8, 1881.

<sup>80</sup> Gibson, 24.

As citizens, we do not desire to patronize denominational schools, neither Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, or any other. We desire to send out children to schools, which are free from the influence of any particular church or denominational influence. The remedy in this matter is quite plain. If our schools are to be conducted in church interest, let us have a man on the Advisory Board from each of our colored churches, in both ends of the city...If this can not [sic] be done, then let the Advisory Board of the colored schools be abolished, and let the white trustees, whom we helped to elect, conduct the schools.<sup>81</sup>

Obviously, the Committee on Colored Schools chose to end the Board of Visitors, which, according to Gibson, was a favorable outcome: “Peace was secured by this action, and our Public Schools [sic] are the pride of our citizens, vieing [sic] with the best disciplined of any city in the country.” Gibson then lists the current black school principals and says they have an “efficient corps of teachers.” This does give added weight to the Committee on Colored Schools’ pronouncement that the schools’ stability no longer warranted another level of supervision. Still, it is strange that Gibson presents this as a victory since he was a member of the Board of Visitors. Perhaps his experience was not a positive one.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Gibson, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Gibson, 25.

The third and final iteration of the cause of the Board of Visitors' end comes from speeches made by leaders of the board at the openings of Eastern and Western Colored Schools. When Horace Morris gave his speech at the September 3, 1874, dedication of Eastern Colored School, he spoke directly of a desire to abolish the Board of Visitors.

A great deal is being said just now about the Board of Visitors, and a petition is being circulated to have the members removed. Now, as far as I am concerned, I can assure the gentlemen who started the petition that they are welcome to take my place... I have worked, as have my coadjutors, to secure good schools and good teachers for our children... We have worked earnestly to get the schools in satisfactory shape, and we can truly say that, with the hearty cooperation of the Board of Trustees, we are enabled to present to the colored people as the result of our labors fine buildings and most excellent schools... Look at the beautiful building we dedicated to the cause of education last year on the corner of Sixth and Kentucky Street [Central Colored School], and now look upon this one, which we have assembled here today to dedicate... and then say, if you can, that the Board of Visitors have been a stumbling block to the education of the colored youth. The main charges, as I have understood, urged against the board, is [sic] that they are opposed to mixed schools. Now, I know that subject has never been

discussed in the board... Now what we want are the best schools we can get today. I know that the present colored schools are better than any we ever had in Kentucky, and though they may not come up to all of your ideas of what they ought to be, they are better than any you have ever had before.<sup>83</sup>

This reads like a separate narrative from Gibson's. While there is mention of a petition generated from the local black community, the one mentioned by Morris says nothing of religious denominational differences. This third narrative is also interesting since it is one of the first mentions of a desire for mixed race schools in Louisville. This is not to say that such sentiments may not have been the norm, but without a local black press, we do not have many records of popular political opinions by Louisville African-Americans in this period. The issue of mixed race schools comes up again when George Brown, chairman of the Board of Visitors, spoke the following year at Western Colored School's dedication and discussed many of the same issues.

The colored public school buildings are now better than the white public school buildings, and it is possible for us to have as good schools within them as the whites, for we are authorized to employ the best teachers that can be found. Now there are some of our people who pretend to think we ought not have colored schools, but mixed schools; and some have

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<sup>83</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 4, 1874.

quoted me as being opposed to mixed schools. Now, I do not wish to be misunderstood on this subject. In localities where the sentiment is in favor of it, I see no harm in mixing them where all the people want it. But in localities where the sentiment is against it, I see nothing the colored people have to gain by mixing...So I'm opposed to it in this city, for I believe that it would be cruel and unfriendly to the educational interest of the colored youth to disturb this new and peaceful opportunity by precipitating them into strife and turmoil that would follow such an experiment, when we can have schools just as good. We had some grades last term that were more than a match for the like grade in the white schools; let us keep it up.<sup>84</sup>

The overwhelming impression one receives from both Morris and Brown's speeches is that they are proud of the newly created black schools, but also content with maintaining segregated schools given the current political climate. Whether this placed them in so much opposition to the black public that they rallied to have the Board of Visitors dissolved may never be known. However, it is likely that the truth lies somewhere in the midst of all three of these narratives and all provide useful insight. Taking them together, it does seem clear that the local black community did not support the Colored Board of Visitors and preferred the leadership of the all-white Committee on Colored Schools. As Gibson mentioned in his account, they preferred the leadership of those they elected despite the fact that the school board had no

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<sup>84</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 3, 1875.

African-American trustees. Regardless of the true cause or the feelings of the African-American community on the matter, the dissolution of the Colored Advisory Board meant that no black Louisvillians were in positions of power over the schools. That setback would be a detriment as Louisville's black teachers fought for pay equality during this period.

The first requests to increase black teachers' salaries date back to a formal request by the Board of Visitors in 1874, which resulted in a small raise for principals but no increase for other teachers. However, the first time Louisville's African-American teachers organized around the issue was in 1879. For a Louisville School Board of Trustees meeting on June 18, 1879, Louisville's African-American teachers submitted a statement to be read regarding their salary grievance. It simply stated that their duties and examinations were equal with the city's white teachers, yet "their salaries are scaled much lower in some instances amounting to mere pittance." The board decided to refer the grievance to the Committee on Salaries, who took no action on the matter. While their language was dramatic, the black teachers were correct that their salaries paled in comparison to their white counterparts. The highest paid African-American principal was at Central Colored School with \$1200 and the lowest paid were at Portland and Fulton schools with \$500. Keep in mind that they also had teaching duties in addition to their administrative duties. By comparison, the highest paid white principal was at Male High School with \$3000 and the lowest paid white principal was at \$650. Principals in white schools did not have teaching duties. The pay spread was slightly less drastic for teachers. There were three classes (first, second, third) and the African-American pay scale went \$500, \$450, and \$350; the white pay scale was \$600, \$500, and \$400. Still, when a janitor at Male High School

made \$500, paying the same to an African-American principal must have seemed beyond unacceptable to black teachers.<sup>85</sup>

Despite continued requests for equalization, there was little progress. In 1881, there were increases for some of the black principals and fourth-class black teachers (those with the least seniority), but those were the only increases to be seen for many years. In addition to racial prejudice, there were two factors standing in the way of salary equalization for African-American teachers in this period. Almost since the inception of African-American schools in 1870, the costs of running the schools required white tax dollars. This extreme disparity between what African-Americans paid in taxes for their schools and what the schools cost almost certainly played a role in the decision to keep African-American teacher and administrator salaries low. Any raises for black faculty were additional tax burdens on white citizens, and the school board trustees risked losing their next election should things get too far out of balance. The second factor related to the disparity between what Louisville spent on African-American students relative to the rest of Kentucky. The average Kentucky African-American teacher salary in 1879 was fifty dollars a year. Louisville African-American faculty arguing a black third-class salary of \$350 equal a \$400 white salary was difficult under those circumstances.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the school board's intransigence on salary equalization, two positive changes for African-American faculty did take place during this period. By 1896, principals in black schools no longer had to teach classes in addition to their

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<sup>85</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, July 4 1874; June 19, 1879 ; Wilson, 34-35.

<sup>86</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 1, 1879; July 1, 1881.



administrative duties. A second advance was a significant adjustment to the student-teacher ratio. Upon the creation of black public schools in 1870, one of the only recorded areas of difference between white and black schools was that African-American faculty had to teach sixty pupils, far more than their white counterparts. Thankfully, it was not long, 1875 to be exact, when the school board equalized the student-teacher ratios. While it did not increase their pay and the ratios were not always enforced, this change did go a long way toward lessening the disparity between white and black faculty workloads.<sup>87</sup>

Another change for Louisville's African-American schools came in 1893 when the larger board dissolved the Colored School Committee. Much in the same way that they themselves dissolved the Board of Visitors because black public schools and their teachers no longer needed the additional oversight, the Colored School Committee ended when the larger board believed that special attention was no longer necessary. It is possible to view this change in either a negative or a positive light. On the unfavorable side, there was no longer a subgroup of the school board dedicated to the needs of the black schools. From the favorable perspective, the larger board continued discussing issues relating to black schools and referred problems to committees in a fashion similar to issues with white schools. In reality, school board members with large numbers of African-American constituents continued to advocate for black schools until school board reforms moved away from ward-based elections in 1910.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Report for the School Year ending June 30, 1897; *The Courier-Journal*, February 2, 1875.

<sup>88</sup> Louisville School Board, Board Meeting Minutes, 1893.

## **Expanding Educational Opportunities**

Despite the constant battle against overcrowded schools, the setback of losing the Colored Board of Visitors, and the struggle over equal treatment for teachers, the early years of black public education in Louisville also brought an expansion of the educational offerings. The Louisville school system introduced music curriculum in 1872, added high school curriculum for African-Americans in 1876, created black night schools in 1882, added a normal department in 1897, and introduced kindergartens in 1902. All of these new opportunities provided necessary educational services for Louisville's African-Americans and, while they were not necessarily equal to white offerings in the city, they were ahead of their time for African-Americans living in Kentucky and the rest of the South. In fact, in regard to high school and kindergarten education, opportunities came sooner to Louisville's African-Americans than they did for white students in most of the country.

While the school board designed the curriculum in Louisville's black schools to mirror their white counterparts, initially music curriculum was unavailable to black students. Advocating from his position as a member of the Committee on Colored Schools, John Pope passed this issue to the larger school board in October 1872. According to Pope, two music teachers received appointments to teach the African-American students, but the board had gone no farther in initiating their teaching in the schools. He then asked the board to pass a resolution allowing for one music lesson per week for African-American students. This resolution passed and music classes began in the black schools. The lack of resistance by the school board to this change makes the absence of music education for black students appear as more of an

oversight than an effort to deny course offerings to black students. In general, primary school curriculum remained comparable between black and white schools throughout the history of Louisville's segregated public schools. This, however, would not be the case for high school curriculum.<sup>89</sup>

During this period, Kentucky state law permitted the creation of high schools; however, the state did not require counties or independent systems like Louisville to provide education past the eighth grade. As a result, the duration of a high school education—when it existed at all—could be as short as one or two years depending on what the local district chose to implement. Efforts to encourage the creation of high schools began at the state level in the late 1860s, but it would be 1908 before the state required high schools in all counties. As such, Kentucky high schools in the mid to late nineteenth century almost always originated in the independent districts run by the state's larger towns and cities. The city of Covington organized the first high school in Kentucky in 1853, followed by Louisville's separate Male and Female High Schools in 1856. No other Kentucky cities followed these two outlier systems until Henderson created a high school in 1870. A few other cities followed suit in the early 1870s, but there were still only a handful of high schools in the state. As late as 1908, when the state mandated high schools, only fifty-nine accredited high schools existed throughout the entire state.<sup>90</sup>

In a fashion similar to that of Kentucky's white high schools, high schools for African-Americans tended to originate in larger towns and cities with a significant

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<sup>89</sup> Wilson, 23.

<sup>90</sup> Hackensmith, 103-106.

black population. Unsurprisingly, these schools were slow to develop with only 31 in existence by 1921. Most state school systems only took the 1908 law mandating high schools seriously in regard to establishing high schools for white youth. It was not until 1930 that the state mandated that all boards of education throughout the state must create a four-year high school program or pay tuition and board for its eligible students to attend high school elsewhere. Even school systems as large as Jefferson County outside of Louisville utilized this provision and paid to send its black students to schools with a higher density of African-Americans rather than pay to erect and maintain their own black high schools. That Kentucky was so slow to make progress in education for even its white high school age students makes the creation of Central Colored High School in Louisville in 1882 all the more extraordinary.<sup>91</sup>

There is no record of any agitation by Louisville's black community for the creation of high school curriculum. The absence may be a case of Louisville's public schools for African-Americans being so young that it would took a few years before there were students in need of an advanced curriculum. Additionally, when the Committee on Colored Schools erected Central Colored School in 1873, they articulated plans to make it a high school at some future date. Movement toward the creation of a black high school began in the fall of 1877, when Central Colored School added an "A grade". This additional year of education was for students seeking to become teachers. Eleven students passed the qualifying exam to enter this course. The sources give little information on the success of this program other than mentioning that the curriculum was limited. As such, in the fall of 1882, the A grade curriculum

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<sup>91</sup> Hackensmith, 108; McVey, 151.

was replaced with a three-year high school curriculum. This greatly expanded class offerings, which included various courses related to the fields of geology, history, Latin, literature, mathematics, philosophy, physiology, and rhetoric. Central Colored High School, though it remained in the Central Colored School facility with the elementary grade students for decades, has the official establishment date of 1882. Despite the shared facilities, school officials and the local press discussed Central Colored High School as a separate entity from the rest of Central Colored School.<sup>92</sup>

While it is unlikely Central's curriculum was equal to that of Louisville Male High School's college prep curriculum, it was certainly comparable. Still, one example of inequity was in 1884 when Central faculty requested materials for their astronomy course (charts, celestial globe, etc.) and the addition of a course in German. Courses in German language existed for white high school students, so the board's denial of this request demonstrates a reluctance to keep Central's high school curriculum up to white high schools standards. Interestingly, the board approved the astronomy course materials request, so the inequality here stems from the fact that such a request was even necessary.<sup>93</sup>

Central Colored High School's first graduating class in the spring of 1884 had seven students. These students had been in the A grade course in 1881-1882 and then finished the last two years of high school curriculum. While Central Colored High School was no longer specifically intended for future teachers, as had been the case when it was only an A grade curriculum, the school board arranged for two of the

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<sup>92</sup> Wilson, 36-39; *The Courier-Journal*, June 30, 1877.

<sup>93</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, April 3, 1884; May 6, 1884.

Central High graduates to teach in the public schools the following year due to a teacher shortage. Until Louisville established a normal school for African-Americans in 1897, it was not uncommon for Central graduates to gain appointments in Louisville's black primary schools.<sup>94</sup>

The first class of Central students to complete the usual three-year curriculum graduated in 1885. This class included six students and McCauley's Opera House held the commencement ceremonies. This was a proud moment for the city's African-American community, and Central would continue to be at the center of black life in Louisville for the better part of a century. Future graduations moved to increasingly larger venues since most years' locations could not accommodate all those hoping to attend. At the first of these well-attended graduations, John Pope, chairman of the Committee on Colored Schools since its inception, and Dr. F.C. Leber, president of the Louisville School Board, spoke to the graduates and their supporters. While Leber's speech expressed his support for continued higher education for African-Americans and promised an additional professor for Central High the following year, John Pope's speech felt like a reworking of past speeches by Louisville officials given to black audiences on the subject of education:

Your education is designed to improve home surroundings and social gatherings; to banish from your midst superstition in its varied forms; to

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<sup>94</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 2, 1884.

make you patriotic, useful and noble citizens in this, the greatest republic in the world.<sup>95</sup>

Central Colored High School grew at a steady clip, with seventy students and eighteen graduates for the 1887-1888 school year. Three years later in 1891, Central Colored High School had 134 enrolled students out of 4,772 African-American students in the Louisville public school system. Clearly, the high school division was growing as quickly as the rest of the black student population during this period. One way in which high school students differed from their younger black school counterparts was in the amount spent per pupil. While the amount of funds sent from the state of Kentucky equalized in 1882, because white school staff had higher salaries the amount Louisville spent per pupil was higher for whites than for blacks. However, the amount spent on Central Colored High School's teacher salaries was much higher than that paid to black elementary teachers. As a result, the amount Louisville spent per black high school pupil was \$22.61 per annum while black primary school students came in at \$12.68 a year. For the sake of comparison, Male High School students cost \$25.01 per school year, which is only \$2.40 more than Central's high school students. Interestingly, the students at Female High School raked up the highest bill at \$34.45 per annum.<sup>96</sup>

After ten years and 98 graduates with a three-year high school curriculum, Central Colored High School upgraded to a four-year course schedule beginning in the

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<sup>95</sup> *Louisville Evening Post*, June 12, 1885.

<sup>96</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 6, 1888; Wilson, 47-48.

fall of 1892. This step was a significant move toward equality with the city's white high schools for two reasons. One, it was now a four-year program like the others. Two, the school board commissioned a committee to create a four-year course plan on par with the offerings at the white high schools. While black elementary school grades and courses had been the same as white primary schools since they opened in 1870, Central's high school curriculum remained a work in progress. This committee concluded that Central would have the same curriculum as Female High School, with some adjustments. For instance, instead of a course on culture and gesture the board implemented a political economy course.<sup>97</sup>

Despite all of the progress made toward equality for Central Colored High School, the school suffered a major setback in the 1890s, which served as a reminder that the school system's priorities still lay with what was best for their white schools. Back in 1886, in an attempt to curb the extreme overcrowding in many schools, the Committee on Colored Schools requested that Central Colored School at Sixth and Kentucky switch school facilities with the white students at a building on Ninth and Magazine Street. This was one suggestion of many the committee made to the board that day, but this one had the most far-reaching consequences. The building at Ninth and Magazine Street was twenty years older than the Central facility and in relatively poor condition. While switching a black and white public school anywhere in the nation would typically be an upgrade for African-American students, the quality

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<sup>97</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 6 1892; Wilson, 50.



invested in the first three schoolhouses for black students (Central, Eastern, and Western) upgraded the white students assigned to Central.<sup>98</sup>

Louisville's black community hoped that this switch would never come to pass and for six years the school board took no action on the issue, saying they were gathering data. In February 1892, the board decided to go forward in just two weeks with the plan to switch the schools. This upset both the African-American community who did not want to lose their flagship school building and many of the white families in the area of the Ninth and Magazine school who objected to the presence of a black school in their neighborhood. One opponent took out an injunction against the change, which held the matter up in court for a year. However, the school board won the case because it was determined that a demographic shift had taken place and more blacks than whites were living in the area around the Ninth and Magazine Street school location. The board appropriated funds to convert Central into a white school and the Ninth and Magazine facility into a black school. There is no record of what such conversions entailed, but the renovations undertaken at Ninth and Magazine fell far short of expectations. The building was so unappealing that a journalist from Indianapolis later wrote that when the school was saved from a fire in 1896, it would have been better if the whole building had burnt to the ground.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, January 5, 1886; Ruby Wilkins Doyle, *Recalling the Record: A Documentary History of the African-American Experience within the Louisville Public School System of Kentucky, 1870-1975* (Chapel Hill: Professional Press, 2005) 201.

<sup>99</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, February 2-7, 1892; April 27, 1893; July 8, 1894; George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 66.

Albert Meyzeek served as Central's principal and oversaw the transition to Ninth and Magazine in the fall of 1894. In his report for the 1894-1895 school year, Meyzeek recounted the dismal transition.

On the second Monday of September last the Central School opened, not under the most favorable circumstances, by reason of the removal of the school from the old location at Sixth and Kentucky to its present location, Ninth and Magazine Streets, the tardy repairing of rooms, and the subsequent displacement of books and apparatus. [When] we were permitted to proceed with the work in a more general sense of the term, we found ourselves unable to procure supplies from headquarters on account of the heavy requisitions already made...The month of September was therefore lost...The mathematics department has not been as strong as it is possible to make it, partly by reason of the need of better facilities, which we hope may be secured next year...I have prayed the Committee on Buildings to make such improvements in the laboratory as are absolutely necessary.<sup>100</sup>

Meyzeek did highlight academic progress made that year in spite of the poor facility renovations. Meyzeek's stand against the board over the shoddy renovations eventually cost him his job at Central. While he was the most qualified of all those

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<sup>100</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Report 1894-1895

serving in the Louisville system, he was transferred to Eastern Colored School beginning in the fall of 1896. This was a downgrade, as there was no high school department at Eastern. While other black school leadership shied away from controversy, for the entirety of his tenure in the Louisville schools, Meyzeek challenged inequality despite continued reprimands from the school board.<sup>101</sup>

Meyzeek's transfer did not put an end to requests for a better facility for Central Colored High School. In 1902, then Central Colored High School principal, Faustin Delany, made a series of specific requests that included a high school building separate from Central's elementary department, raises for teachers, the hiring of more female faculty, and that Central High School be named after John Miller Maxwell—Central's first high school principal who had recently passed away. While it appears that over time more women joined Central's faculty, the school board adopted none of the other requests.<sup>102</sup>

As the nineteenth century came to a close, Central Colored High School enrollment crossed the three hundred mark. This means that black high school enrollment more than doubled in the 1890s. Central Colored High School would continue to grow and flourish despite the less-than-stellar accommodations at the Ninth and Magazine Street facility. Moving forward in the twentieth century, a key challenge facing Central was the debate over continuing the college preparatory and academic curriculum they were using versus embracing the growing trend toward vocational training in black schools throughout the country.

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<sup>101</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Report 1894-1895; Wilson, 69-167.

<sup>102</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Report 1901-1902.

The creation of night schools for black students occurred in 1882, the same year that Central Colored School added a true high school department. Louisville's black community first asked for night schools in 1874, since three schools existed for white boys who worked during the day and many African-Americans hoped for such an opportunity. However, those night schools were a failure and closed before the end of that school year; the blame lay with poor discipline and planning. In October 1882, Louisville's school board trustees relaunched their night school program and included African-Americans. Kentucky's 1882 equalization of the funds paid to Louisville for black and white education gave the trustees the money for this endeavor. There would be two night schools for white boys, two for African-American boys (one at Western and one at Eastern), and one for white girls. There was no mention of night schools for African-American girls.<sup>103</sup>

Outside of the exemption of young black women, all of the night schools followed the same rules and regulations just as the school board held general white and black public schools to the same operating procedures. All of the schools opened for two hours, four evenings a week. Students must be at least twelve years old and have a certificate from their employer "certifying to the fact that [their] character is such as to render it probable that attending night school will be beneficial". Absences required a signed note from a parent or employer. The night schools employed black and white teachers correspondingly and held them all to the same certification and experience requirements. There were also principals appointed to each school.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, October 3, 1882; October 17, 1882.

<sup>104</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, October 3, 1882.

When the local press attended the opening of the night schools several weeks later, they noted the broad age range of participants at the black night schools. “The majority of them were grown men, many being over forty years of age, and some even older, of every size and description.” The teachers organized the students by their knowledge, not by their age; making classrooms, to the unknowing eye, look more like parent-teacher conferences than a group of pupils. The school board began to examine the issue of allowing older adults to attend the schools in 1885, and decided to only enroll those aged twenty-five or younger. As previously discussed, as an urban environment where whites and blacks lived and worked in close proximity, Louisville whites consistently preferred an educated African-American population. Allowing black adults to attend night schools only strengthened that cause. However, during this period of rapid growth and funding challenges, creating an age limit was a practical solution as it still allowed young adults to attend.<sup>105</sup>

Another challenge facing African-American education throughout the South was a shortage of qualified teachers. Louisville schools paid well enough to attract African-American teachers from around the country and Kentucky established the State Normal School for Colored Persons in 1886 outside the city of Frankfort, but many locals expressed dissatisfaction with their inability to receive teacher training in their native city. To provide this educational opportunity to local blacks and prevent a teacher shortage during this period of rapid growth, the Louisville School Board of Trustees added a normal school curriculum option at Central Colored High School in 1897. Graduates of Central would have the option to remain for an additional year to

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<sup>105</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, October 17, 1882; November 3, 1885; September 9, 1886.

receive teacher training. One school year gave the faculty and students little time to prepare, but they created a curriculum that ranged from the academic (theory of teaching, psychology, history of education) to the practical (school management, methods of teaching, gymnastics). Students in the normal class also participated in traditional student teaching, wherein they prepared lessons and taught them in the schools under the supervision of their faculty. The first graduating class of the normal school was quite large with thirty graduates since it included former Central High students who graduated over the previous few years. The second class graduated seven students in 1899, which represented only one year of Central graduates.<sup>106</sup>

For the 1900-1901, the normal school adopted a two-year curriculum. This allowed the faculty to better balance traditional academic instruction with hands-on student teaching. Cadet work was what they called student teaching. Under the new two-year system, the teacher trainees would spend the last period of each day working with students in the primary department during the fall of their second year. They would then spend the entire spring semester of the two-year program exclusively on cadet work. While the normal school students continued to be graduates of Central Colored High School, the normal school later moved into a primary school to be closer to their future constituents. The initiative to create a normal school for African-Americans in Louisville paid dividends for years to come. While the board often had to look outside Louisville to hire white teachers, the normal school at Central Colored School allowed them to hire locals who had come through their schools.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Reports, 1897-1898; 1901-1902.

<sup>107</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Reports, 1897-1898; 1901-1902; 1911-1912.

At the opposite end of the public school spectrum, the school board added kindergarten to the offerings for Louisville's black children around the turn of the century. The creation of public kindergartens in Louisville was a significant step forward. In the late 1880s, private citizens in the city established the Free Kindergarten Association and by the end of the nineteenth century, there were ten kindergartens serving over 400 Louisville children. While the Louisville School Board did not fund any kindergartens, they did provide some with classroom space in public schools. At this time, there was also one private kindergarten for black students, known as Hope Colored Kindergarten. So successful was the Free Kindergarten Association's initiative that Louisville introduced public kindergartens in 1902. Two public kindergartens opened for African-American students, one at Main Street Colored and the other at Western Colored School. The curriculums and outcomes for black and white kindergarten programs were identical. Black community requests to expand the kindergarten programs received considerable support and offerings expanded overtime. This hearty support may have originated in reformers' belief that kindergartens began the process of teaching children self-control and being a good citizen at a crucial age. Articles supporting kindergartens as a means of crime prevention were common in Louisville's press. Even if social control was an impetus for white support of black kindergarten programs, Louisville's black public kindergartens were light years ahead of their time. Kindergartens did not become Kentucky-state standard until 1979.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ellis, 94, 326; Wilson, 60; *The Courier-Journal*, September 21, 1890; May 27, 1891; January 27, 1909.

## **Conclusion**

As the new century dawned, it was clear that African-American schools in Louisville had significantly progressed from their first manifestation in the basements of three local churches. When compared to black schools throughout Kentucky and the rest of the South, Louisville's numerous facilities and academic programs are especially impressive. The use of white tax dollars years to fund the black schools and the high spending per pupil also lend merit to the notion that Louisville's leadership took the education of African-Americans seriously. Still, however fine Louisville's schools appeared by comparison, there was systemic prioritization of white over black students. For instance, as much as city leaders deserve praise for the erection of a lavish school building for Central Colored School in 1873, when a white school was in need of a better facility those same leaders had no qualms about switching Central's black students into the inferior former-white school building.

This tension between the superiority of Louisville's African-American schools when compared to others in the region and their inferiority when compared with Louisville's white schools is the defining characteristic of the system. Moving forward into the twentieth century, this tension will be at the center of virtually all developments made for Louisville's African-American schools.



## **Chapter 4**

### **A NEW BOARD OF EDUCATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR LOUISVILLE'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY, 1910-1930**

#### **Introduction**

After decades of relative tranquility in Louisville's school system, the period after a major structural overhaul in 1910 ushered in a time of dramatic change in the city's education system. After a successful campaign by education reformers, Louisville's school board transformed in regard to how the community elected board members, the lengths of those members' terms, and even their accountability to the community. These changes significantly impacted the African-American community. With the new board, Louisville's black citizens lost their ability to hold board members accountable at the ballot box and, as a result, changed their methods of advocating for African-American schools and students. Once in power, the new Board of Education reduced overcrowding, raised health standards in school facilities, strove to improve the quality of and conditions for teachers, and sought to streamline curriculum. While most of the board's reforms improved the quality of education in Louisville, equal opportunities and facilities for African-American students remained rare.

#### **School Board Reform and its Consequences for Louisville's Black Community**

Due to the work of reformers who succeeded in their efforts to have Louisville's city charter amended, there was a radical change in the structure of the

city school board after 1910. Traditionally, each ward elected one member of the school board. These board members catered to the needs and interests of their specific ward, which gave African-Americans influence over the board elections in wards where they were concentrated. In 1910, Louisville had fourteen wards and, thus, fourteen school board members. Beginning with the election of November 1910, all Louisville voters selected five board members in citywide elections from a non-partisan list of candidates. This change reduced the black community's ability to influence the school board. The old Louisville School Board, which had been relatively responsive to concerns from the black community, transformed into the new Louisville Board of Education, which proved to be a powerful entity that placed its agenda ahead of the needs of the African-American community.

Historically, African-Americans in Kentucky enjoyed the franchise once they received it through the Fifteenth Amendment. The bluegrass state did not deny them the right to vote when blacks in other southern states had their enfranchisement stripped through legal and extralegal means in the following decades. Historians have argued this was due to Kentucky's African-American numbers being so low as to preclude their intimidating either mainstream political party. In Louisville, however, black voters were a significant voting bloc due to the ward system. They were too small of a minority on their own to greatly affect most citywide votes, but in wards where they were concentrated they wielded significant influence. Since the school board elections were ward-based, the black community could often remove board members who did not support their schools in the manner they saw fit.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> John H. Fenton, *Politics in the Border States; A Study of the Patterns of Political Organization, and Political Change, Common to the Border States: Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri* (New Orleans: Hauser Press, 1957); *The Courier-*

The previous chapter of this work contained numerous examples of the school board's responsiveness to black community concerns. In the years leading up to the school board restructuring of 1910, school board candidates from both parties regularly spoke of their commitment to black education to woo black voters in their ward. Once elected, school board members with African-American constituents worked diligently to maintain their support. With the dissolution of the Colored School Committee in 1893, the black community could no longer go to that group to air their grievances, so individual school board members then began to present items of black community concern to their fellow board members. The wards held their Board members accountable for their proposals and their voting records, but they were not always able to get results due to an inability among board members to come to a consensus. These factors likely account for the high turnover rate of school board members.<sup>110</sup>

In fact, it was the political nature of the school board and the high levels of infighting that contributed to a major restructuring of the school board in 1910. Reform in Louisville stemmed from a statewide educational reform movement wherein many rural schools consolidated and saw their leadership ranks reduced. Locally, a reform movement supported by top local civic organizations, like Louisville's Commercial Club and the Federation of Women's Clubs, worked vigorously from 1908 to 1910 to create a small school board totally removed from ward politics who would work together in harmony. There was a precedent for these

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*Journal*, August 5, 1890; November 9, 1898; November 9, 1904; November 2, 1908; November 6, 1909.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

changes since Louisville's water works and parks had recently transitioned into governance by small and seemingly apolitical commissions. The education reformers plans also included an empowered superintendent, functioning as an education expert and not a politician, who would play a larger role in day-to-day administrative affairs, such as the hiring and promotion of teachers. The reformers plans received significant support from the *Courier-Journal's* editor, Henry Watterson, who regularly wrote editorials criticizing the role that "political jobbery" played in Louisville's education system. These reformers took their ideas directly to the school board when several dozen women from the local Federation of Women's Clubs met with the board to endorse a non-partisan board. In response, the school board passed a resolution in early 1909 calling for the city charter's amendment to allow citywide, instead of ward-based, school board elections.<sup>111</sup>

Following this resolution, the Louisville Commercial Club drafted a bill requesting that the Kentucky state legislature reduce the Louisville School Board from fourteen members elected by their wards to five members elected from the city at large. This bill arrived at the state legislature in 1910 with the endorsement of the city's most powerful groups and the *Courier-Journal*. Many men of influence from the city went to the state capital in support of the bill, including some members of the school board. The *Courier-Journal* said that, "no bill ever went to Frankfort with more

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<sup>111</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, January 27, 1909 (a special edition focusing on issues of school reform); February 27, 1909; January 6, 1909; January 25, 1909.

general indorsement [sic].” It came as a shock to no one that the bill passed both the Kentucky Senate and House of Representatives without any dissenting votes.<sup>112</sup>

While the path to legislative reform was easy, the actual transition to the new school board proved to be tumultuous. Despite the reformers calls for a school board free from politics, the at-large elections held in the fall of 1910 were decidedly political in nature. Technically speaking, any eligible citizen could get on the ballot with the support of four-hundred signatures, but slates of candidates organized almost immediately. The local Democratic Party created a ticket of their nominees and campaigned vigorously for their election. No democrat on the existing board had voted in favor of the resolution to change the board, so at the very least they hoped to hold a few seats. There were two other tickets put forward in the election, neither of which directly affiliated with the Republican Party. Catholics meeting at the Scottish Rite Cathedral organized to create a “people’s ticket.” The most successful ticket was put forward by Louisville’s Commercial Club. The members of this club were the city’s elites and they used their wealth and influence; first, to promote the legislative changes that allowed for a new school board and, second, to dominate the election and take control of the new board.<sup>113</sup>

When the school board members resolved in 1909 to support at-large elections, it seemed that they did not anticipate the possibility of their failure to win reelection

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<sup>112</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, January 16, 1910; January 25-27, 1910; March 3, 1910; March 8-10, 1910.

<sup>113</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, November 3- 5, 1910; January 1, 1911; Alwin Seekamp and Roger Burlingame, eds., *Who’s Who in Louisville* (Louisville: Louisville Press Club, 1912) 95-227.

under those circumstances. Only two of the fourteen board members gained seats on the five-person board. Dr. I.N. Bloom, a Harvard-educated physician and professor of cutaneous disease at the University of Louisville, retained a seat on the board as well as its presidency. Edward Gottschalk, who ran the Standard Printing Company in Louisville, also kept a seat on the board. Victor Engelhard, president of a coffee roasting company; John C. Strother, an attorney; and Albert B. Weaver, a dental surgeon, joined them as new members. All five of the board members were among Louisville's elites and featured in Who's Who of Louisville. While Bloom was the only member with experience in the field of teaching, all five men embraced the reforms and proposed new practices put forward by Louisville's Commercial Club.<sup>114</sup>

Upon the loss of their seats, six former school board members decided to challenge the election results by acting as if their version of the school board had never dissolved. Just after Christmas in 1910, these six former board members held a school board meeting along with seven new members they selected themselves. They claimed they were the rightful school board since that their terms had not expired, which technically was accurate. However, their additional claim that the law creating the new school board was unconstitutional was unconvincing. In the meantime, the new board met on January 2, 1911, and the issue arose over the status of the superintendent. Edgar H. Mark, the acting superintendent, believed he was to continue in his position regardless of the board restructuring. However, the new board believed that they could appoint a new superintendent and replace any other administrator or teacher. All of these issues went to court and both the local circuit court and state court

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

of appeals ruled in favor of the new board. Both judges asserted the constitutionality of the law creating the new board. They also affirmed that while the new legislation did not specifically mention the appointment of a new superintendent as part of the restructuring, it stood to reason that the board had the right to hire a superintendent who would carry out its vision. Had the new board approved of the work of Superintendent Mark, they would have retained his services.<sup>115</sup>

Perhaps due in part to the protests from the old board over their legitimacy, the new board chose to make a clean break with the past. They changed the board's name from the Louisville School Board to the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky. They also reset the numeration on all school board related documents, such as on the "First Report of the Board of Education," whose first issue was published in 1913. While the name change and renumbering of all the board records was not truly necessary, they were correct that they entering a new era in education for the city of Louisville.<sup>116</sup>

One significant break from the past was the backgrounds and tenures of superintendents in the new system. Since 1863, only two men served as superintendent for Louisville's schools. George H. Tingley, Jr., who served thirty-one years and

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<sup>115</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, January 1-11, 1911; Seekamp, 95-227.

<sup>116</sup> Seekamp, 95-227; Margaret Margaret Bell, "Superintendents, Louisville Public Schools," Jefferson County Public School Archives Wiki, [http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/932a4/Superintendents\\_\\_Louisville\\_Public\\_Schools.html](http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/932a4/Superintendents__Louisville_Public_Schools.html);

"First Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from January 1, 1911, to July 1, 1912," Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY.

retired due to his increasing blindness, and Edgar H. Mark, whom the new board removed despite his sixteen years of service, brought stability to the Louisville education system since the school board members were in constant flux under the ward-based election system. Both Tingley and Mark were educators with significant teaching and administrative experience, but both lacked a university degree. Based on the superintendents chosen by the board for the next few decades, Mark's lack of a formal degree likely played a role in his dismissal. Once the courts ruled in their favor, the Board of Education selected Ernest O. Holland as the new superintendent. Holland had a doctorate from Columbia University and was head of Male High School's English Department from 1900 to 1905, which he left to serve as a professor at Indiana University until his invitation to become Louisville's superintendent. Holland served effectively until he left in 1915 to become president at Washington State College. Holland's superintendency began a trend that would last decades. Over the next 35 years, nine superintendents served an average of four and a half years (the shortest term was less than a year and the longest was seven years). All these men had significant graduate-level education and all but two of them had doctorates. All of these superintendents left the position for the same reason: they resigned in order to take a more prestigious and/or higher paying position elsewhere. The board regularly complained that the \$5000 maximum salary for school district superintendents, a constitutional limit in the state of Kentucky, hindered their ability to retain strong candidates.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Technically, there were eight superintendents, but one man served two nonconsecutive terms. The board persuaded Dr. Zenos Scott to return to Louisville



While the new era in Louisville public school education ushered in a period of revolving-door superintendents, the city concurrently experienced a major change in the longevity of its Board of Education members. In the three decades following the launch of the new board there were only fifteen different members on the five-person Board of Education. By contrast, in the twenty years before the school board reform, over one-hundred people served on the fourteen-man ward-based board. A significant factor in this change was that the length of board members' terms increased from two years to four years under the new structure. Louisville still held elections every two years, but for only two or three seats of the five. As all of the new board members won their first reelection bids, in 1912 and 1914 respectively, it was 1916 before any of the original five men elected in 1910 vacated their seats. This second board configuration included the addition of two new members, Alex G. Barret, a prominent attorney who served six years, and William H. Camp, a successful restaurateur who would serve until 1940. These men replaced Victor Engelhard and John Strother.<sup>118</sup>

Another factor contributing to the board members' long tenures was their status as economic elites. All of the members who served in the first decades after the

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after the board offered him outside funds beyond the state's salary limit. It was at this time that he served the record seven-year term.

Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1912-1920, 1930-1931, 1940-1941. Jefferson County Public School Archives, Louisville, KY; Jackson, Brenda Feast Jackson, "The Policies and Purposes of Black Public Schooling in Louisville, Kentucky, 1890-1930" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1976), 51-100; Seekamp, 95-227.

launch of the Board of Education were successful entrepreneurs. In addition to the board members previously mentioned, two other gentlemen who served on the board during this period worked in two of Louisville's most profitable economic sectors. C. H. Humphrey was a director of a railroad company and served on a number of corporate boards. E. Leland Taylor had holdings in the distilling and railroad industries in addition to being one of the city's most powerful land agents. All of the board members used their economic clout to remain on the Board of Education ballots by utilizing their influence in the local Republican and Democratic parties, the Louisville Commercial Club, and the numerous charitable organizations they joined. Virtually all of the new board members won reelection and only left the board when they chose to no longer serve or run for reelection. Of the original five-member board, I. N. Bloom held his seat until he passed away in 1922; Edward Gottschalk served until 1934 when he chose not to run for reelection; and Albert Weaver served until he resigned in 1933.<sup>119</sup>

The professional caliber of the superintendents and the extended terms of board members were intended outcomes of the school board reforms of 1910. However, one of their intended outcomes-- the autonomy of the board from ward politics—diminished the influence of the local community. Once elected, Board of Education members functioned with the assurance of knowing that displeasure of residents in a particular ward had little influence over their ability to win reelection, so they managed the public schools as they saw fit. Since Louisville's citizens now cast ballots for the board members on a citywide ticket, no board member was beholden to

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

a particular sector of the community. Previously, if the ward schools did not receive the care and attention voters felt they deserved, they could, and regularly did, vote in a new board member at the next election. As such, school board members under the old rules routinely brought requests and concerns from their ward directly to the school board. No longer mired by the threat of losing their seat, board members focused on implementing the reforms they themselves prioritized.

Ward residents' loss of power over the board mirrored the rise in influence of a new contingent—women. Louisville's female clubs had played a significant role in advocating for school reform and the legislation that created the new Board of Education in 1910. During this same period, women in Louisville spearheaded the state's female suffrage movement and dominated leadership positions in the Kentucky Equal Rights Association. They partially achieved their aim when women in Louisville secured the right to vote in school board elections in 1912. Once they could tangibly support school reform with their ballots, the press and the board regularly credited local women with helping the new board achieve success and stay in office. The city's politically minded women had much to celebrate in 1920 when both the Nineteenth Amendment completed its ratification journey and they achieved their goal of electing a female member to the Board of Education.<sup>120</sup>

Lelia Leidenger was the first woman nominated for the Louisville Board of Education in 1920, and she was successful in winning a seat in her first election.

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<sup>120</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, November 4, 1912; November 3, 1920; November 7, 1921; November 8, 1922; *The American School Board Journal* (September 1920); John E. Kleber, ed., "Woman Suffrage" in *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 949-950.

Leidenger took the place of Alex Barrett, who chose not to run for reelection; Barrett's short tenure was an anomaly for a board member during this period. Leidenger's background made her a natural fit for the board. As the wife of a successful manufacturer, Leidenger's wealth and elite status maintained the character of the board. As the headmistress of her own private school, she had considerable educational expertise to lend to the board. Like her peers, she would have a long tenure on the Board of Education until she chose to resign. In fact, Leidenger's election created an apparent "ladies seat" on the school board. When Leidenger resigned in 1932, Mrs. L. Seelbach, Jr., the wife of a powerful local businessman, replaced her. Seelbach would lose her seat to Evelyn Zubrod in 1934, who would have a long tenure on the board.<sup>121</sup>

The rise in influence of women with the new board stood in direct contrast with the loss of power for the African-American community. In the early twentieth century, the local Republican Party depended on the African-American vote to tip the scales in their favor over the Democrats in both ward and citywide elections. The local press routinely gave credit to the black vote for Republican victories. Despite their continued value in most elections, Louisville's black voters lost their influence in school board elections after the 1910 reforms. For decades, candidates supported by the black community never won seats on the board and efforts by the black community to keep incumbents from reelection always failed. Their Republican Party alliance did not help since non-political entities, like the Louisville Commercial Club

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

or the Board of Trade, exerted their influence over who gained nominations for the Board of Education instead of the traditional political parties.<sup>122</sup>

In fact, the local women's vote complicated the black community's efforts to assert influence over the Board of Education. White women's groups regularly spoke publically about the need to get out the white women's vote to make sure black women's votes did not carry elections. The local branch of the League of Women Voters went so far as to campaign against Board of Education candidates supported by the African-American community. For example, while Lelia Leidenger's election in 1920 was progress for women, it came at the expense of the black community. One of Leidinger's competitors for a seat on the Board of Education was an African-American candidate.<sup>123</sup>

The black community's loss of power in Board of Education elections had significant consequences. Their ability to elect or deny reelection to their ward-based school board members had historically been their primary channel for advocating change in black schools. When that had been the case, individual school board members regularly brought the concerns of their constituents to the group. If their ward board members failed to support the black community's interests, they replaced them at the next election. The old board spent a significant amount of time discussing hiring, firing, promotions, and other policies relating to black faculty and staff. The new board rarely engaged these issues, instead delegating those decisions to

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<sup>122</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, November 5-6, 1912; November 6, 1918; November 3, 1920; November 8, 1922; November 7, 1928.

<sup>123</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, November 3, 1920; November 6, 1912; November 4, 1920; November 7, 1922.

the superintendent. The superintendent was in no way beholden to any preferences or grievances in the black community. In fact, the new board habitually referred a multitude of issues for both white and black schools to the superintendent, further compounding local black's lack of agency in school matters. After 1910, individual board members rarely introduced issues; most items discussed would originate from school administrators' questions, initiatives, and concerns. In the years following the school board restructuring, Louisville's African-American community shifted gears to try different strategies for asserting influence over the Board of Education.<sup>124</sup>

### **Organized Resistance to School Inequality**

Other than the civil efforts to get public schools in the late 1860s and the quest for improved facilities over the years, there had been little to no activism or agitation on the part of the city's black community regarding their schools. As demonstrated in past chapters, the school board responded to requests from the Board of Visitors and the Colored School Committee, so major community action was unnecessary. When those entities dissolved, the black community utilized their ward board member's sway. However, having lost political influence due to the new school board election structure, Louisville's African-Americans worked to reestablish their voice to enhance their schools.

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<sup>124</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1912-1941; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Board Meeting Minutes, 1910-1941; Jackson, Brenda Feast Jackson, "The Policies and Purposes of Black Public Schooling in Louisville, Kentucky, 1890-1930" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1976), 51-100.

The primary approach African-Americans used to advocate for change was petitions. They created petitions covering all manner of issues from facility requests to academic curriculum. African-Americans in Louisville created any number of petitions for presentation to the old school board, but, back then, they had a board member who felt obligated to present them to their colleagues. Despite the fact that the number of petitions sent to the board after the 1910 restructuring appears to have doubled, the Board of Education ignored them. The minutes of the board reference only one single petition presented at a board meeting by one of its members. In 1914, I. N. Bloom presented a petition from the black community requesting the creation of night schools for African-Americans. The Louisville school system began offering night schools to both whites and blacks in 1882, but over the years they were phased out from time to time. The board took no action on this petition after its presentation. In the first several decades under the new board, the black community's most oft repeated request was for a new facility for Central Colored High School. It would be forty years before the Board of Education approved of a new facility for Louisville's only African-American high school. The failure of African-Americans to successfully utilize petitions to affect change in their schools was not a product of racism; instead it was the new board's approach to governance. The Board of Education meeting minutes consistently show that they attended to matters and problems raised by the administrators entrusted with running the schools rather than address the concerns of community members, whether black or white.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Board Meeting Minutes, October 16, 1914, 1910-1934; The Courier-Journal, October 3, 1882; Thelma Cayne Tilford-

The catalyst for moving beyond petitions to organized community action was a million-dollar bond proposed by the Board of Education in 1913. Louisville voters approved the bond and the funds went to build new schools and improve others. None of those schools housed African-American students. What benefit did they receive from the million-dollar bond? A handful of black schools moved into some of the abandoned white-school facilities. The practice of moving blacks into facilities no longer considered appropriate for white students dated back to 1886, when the board forced Central Colored School to leave their fine and recently built schoolhouse so that white students could make use of the facility. In the intervening twenty-seven years, it was customary for the city to build a new school for white students, and make the old facility available to black students. That is not to say that black students reaped no benefits from the 1913 bond—in 1916, Central Colored High School moved into a formerly white school building at Ninth and Chesnut, a mere two blocks from its prior location, which made it a standalone high school no longer sharing space with an elementary school. This was an improvement, but fell far short of the community's expectations.<sup>126</sup>

No public outcry accompanied this incident, but it did prime the black community for when, in 1920, the Board of Education requested funds to build several new white schools. Just as in 1913, there were no planned improvements or new facilities for black students. Wishing to voice their dissent, many local African-

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Weathers, *A History of Louisville Central High School, 1882-1982* (Louisville: unknown, 1982).

<sup>126</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1912-1914; Tilford-Weathers, 1-11.



Americans gathered and decided to take action. They decided that electing one amongst them to the school board was the solution. This move raises the question of why no African-American had a seat on the board. It was not for a lack of qualified candidates. For example, Albert Meyzeek ceaselessly championed for black schools for decades, as both a principal and community activist, but he never had a seat on the school board. Despite his role as president of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association and position on the executive committee of the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools, racism in Louisville outweighed his qualifications. Running for office would have likely put Meyzeek at odds with the school board since he served as principal of the Eastern Colored School District (which included running the Louisville Colored Normal School). After his retirement from work in Louisville's public schools in 1943, the state appointed Meyzeek to the Kentucky Board of Education, where he served from 1948 to 1956. Despite Meyzeek's electing not to run for office in 1920, the time had finally come for the African-American community to create leverage to improve their schools<sup>127</sup>

The man ultimately selected to be their candidate for the Board of Education in 1920 was Wilson Lovett; he was the director of the Standard Life Insurance Company and had previously worked at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. This pedigree mirrored the profile of the school board members who were leaders in the

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<sup>127</sup> ; George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 166-168; "Albert Ernest Meyzeek," Louisville Free Public Library, <http://www.lfpl.org/western/htms/meyzeek.htm>; "Wilson Stephen Lovett," Notable Kentucky African-Americans Database, [http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note\\_id=139](http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note_id=139); *The Louisville Leader*, September 25, 1920; October 9, 1920.

business community while also having experience in education. Lovett promised an aggressive campaign based on his commitment to advocate for better facilities and equipment for African-American students. He specifically took issue with the ongoing practice of transferring black schools into abandoned white school facilities. In the fall of 1920, Louisville's black community threw its support behind Lovett's candidacy. All local black press outlets lauded his candidacy. Black ministers encouraged their constituents to vote for Lovett, and civic activists promoted him throughout the wards. As this was a citywide election, not ward-based, even universal African-American support might fall short of securing one of their own a seat on the school board. The black community's opposition to the proposed school bond amplified the fervor surrounding Lovett's campaign.<sup>128</sup>

The election that fall had mixed results. Lovett failed to win a seat on the five-person school board by more than thirty thousand votes, but they did succeed at defeating the bond. Credit for the defeat of the bond went to the African-American campaign against it. While they had failed to gain a representative on the school board, they did succeed at reminding the white community that their political support was valuable. Their efforts bore fruit in 1921 when the school board proposed another million-dollar bond. This time the board designated \$125,000 exclusively for black school facilities. The very same campaigners who fought the 1920 bond helped achieve victory for this bond. With its passage, the next year construction began on a

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<sup>128</sup> "Wilson Stephen Lovett," Notable Kentucky African-Americans Database, [http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note\\_id=139](http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note_id=139); *The Louisville Leader*, September 25, 1920; October 9, 1920.

new African-American school. It was a small facility with only four classrooms, but they built utilities for a six-room addition in the future. This was a wise plan given the unrelenting growth of the African-American student population since public schools opened to them in 1870. Other schools received improvements. The funds added a cafeteria, gymnasium, and ten classrooms to the existing Central High School facility at Ninth and Chesnut Street. The board still had not equalized facilities for African-American schools, (for instance, coal yards constantly scattered dust on one black school.) but this was still a significant victory for the African-American community in Louisville. While the community succeeded at getting the Board of Education to give more funds to their school facilities, they continued to fail at their attempts to elect an African-American to the school board. Lovett ran again in 1928 and lost. No African-American would win a seat on the board until Woodford R. Porter Sr. did so in 1958.<sup>129</sup>

A significant victory for African-American teachers in Louisville followed when they began to receive equal pay in the early to mid-1920s. Despite decades of advocacy for equalization, the date and circumstances of this important change are unclear. In the city Board of Education annual report for July 1, 1925, to June 30, 1926, the school board relays that they adopted a single-salary schedule. In the past, there was a separate salary schedule that paid black educators and principals significantly less than their white counterparts. The new schedule prefaced that all

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<sup>129</sup> *The Louisville Leader*, January 29, 1921; “Thirteenth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1923 to June 20, 1924;” George D. Wilson, *A Century of Negro Education in Louisville, Kentucky* (Louisville: Louisville Municipal College, 1941) 68-69.

promotions would be made on the basis of merit with regard to both length of service and “character” of service. The board defined character of service in two ways: one clear and one more subjective in nature. The schedule categorized teachers as either normal school or college graduates. The starting salaries differed by \$300, with the maximum salary amount differential at \$500. The convoluted categorization related to “Class A” and “Class B” distinctions. The report stated that the “Class B salary schedule is reserved for those teachers whose superior teaching, advanced study, and higher professional equipment justify higher compensation than the teachers in Class A receive.” Clearly, this vague distinction left room for abuses, but research into that particular topic I leave to other historians.<sup>130</sup>

There is no record of any reaction from the black community to this salary equalization. The mainstream local press, *The Courier-Journal*, did not cover the change. There is a chance that the only local African-American paper at that time, *The Louisville Leader*, went to press with the story. Unfortunately, few issues of the paper survived a fire in the 1950s, so the record available to historians is incomplete. For instance, only one-half of one issue from the entire year of 1926 survived. Not only is the exact date of the new salary schedule decision unclear, the decision was stated as an item in an annual report, but other sources raise the possibility that a salary equalization had taken place years before.

On April 19, 1923, Thomas F. Blue, head of the Colored Department of the Louisville Free Public Library, delivered the welcome address at a meeting of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association. In his comments, intended to welcome

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<sup>130</sup> “Fifteenth Report Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1925, to June 30, 1926.”

other educators in the state to Louisville, Blue espoused numerous advantages of black life in Louisville:

We welcome you to the city where there is no race friction, a city where the members of both races dwell together in peace and security. We welcome you to a city which always includes its colored citizens when providing for public welfare. The whites have splendid elementary, high, and normal schools, so have we. The whites have well-equipped public libraries in beautiful Carnegie buildings, so have we. The whites have a Y.M.C.A. and a Y.W.C.A., so have we... We welcome you to a city where the weird mask, and the midnight raid of the Ku Klux Klan is unknown... We welcome you to a Southern city where the "Jim Crow" streetcar is not seen... We welcome you to a city whose Board of Education gives its colored elementary teachers "equal pay for equal work." A few years ago when Louisville teachers received a substantial increase in salary, the colored received the same as the whites.<sup>131</sup>

Blue's speech suggests that black and white teachers, at least those at the elementary level, already received equal pay by 1923 and that both black and white teachers received the same pay raise a few years before. Unfortunately, he makes no mention of when either of those events took place. Another problem is that Blue is

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<sup>131</sup> *The Louisville Leader*, May 5, 1923.

clearly trying to paint Louisville in the most flattering light possible. However, historians should not wholly dismiss this source. Blue addressed his remarks to most of the top African-American educators in the state, which meant they would have been keenly aware of Louisville's fight for equal pay as they were also fighting similar battles with their school districts. Blue could not pretend that such an important victory occurred if it were not the case.

While there is a lack of clarity over salary equalization, it is quite clear that the years following the restructuring of the school board experienced a dramatic increase in agitation by Louisville's black community for more equitable treatment for African-American students and staff. Prior to the restructuring of the board, the school board responded to black community concerns, if only to please their constituents and keep their position. With that political advantage gone after 1910 and the subsequent failure of petitions, blacks in Louisville turned to new strategies to assert their will over their schools. This included efforts to elect one of their own to the school board and defeating a discriminatory bond at the ballot box. Moving forward, agitation for improved educational opportunities will be frequent. Unfortunately, African-Americans in Louisville would never wield the influence over the Board of Education as they had the pre-reform school board. Only after significant white flight to the Louisville suburbs in the 1960s would the black community again have significant power over the city's Board of Education.

### **African-American Public School Education under the New Board of Education**

The new Board of Education, while consistent in their dismissal of complaints and pleas from the black community during this period, never ignored or neglected

Louisville's African-American schools. The Board of Education implemented most changes in both black and white schools. For instance, they wanted all schools to be less crowded and less unhealthy. The board never failed to improve black schools wanting in those areas. Generally speaking, the new board worked to see that all city schools meet a certain standard regardless of the school being for black or white students, or in a rich or poor neighborhood. Their universal standards improved on the old school board's modus operandi where a school gained benefits only because its ward board member got it done in order to secure reelection support. However, the egalitarianism of the new board did not extend to equalized curriculum for black and white schools. Additionally, the tradition of providing new facilities to white students and passing along their old building to black students increased under the new board. African-American schools also were the last to receive new buildings when funds became available.

One of the first tasks taken on by the reorganized board when it took power in January 1911 was the issue of overcrowding in Louisville schools. This was the case for both white and black facilities. The board reported that eighty-eight classrooms served anywhere from fifty-five to one hundred and three students. Reformers recommended, and the board agreed, that thirty-five to forty students should be the maximum class size for reasons of both health and academic progress. President Bloom reported that Louisville's students also needed more individual attention from their teachers, which the persistent overcrowding prevented. To relieve the pressure, they set out to hire more faculty. Superintendent Holland hired black teachers exclusively from Louisville's Colored Normal School. For white schools, the board preferred candidates from the Louisville City Normal School, but if none were found

they would then seek candidates from other normal schools in Kentucky. With in-state options exhausted, the board extended the search for white teachers past Kentucky's borders. There is no record of a need to go outside state borders for African-American faculty since Louisville's Colored Normal School had ample graduates. While the student population in Louisville schools remained steady in the first years after the new Board of Education took over, they hired thirty-six teachers in the first year and a half alone.<sup>132</sup>

The board solved the issue of classroom space with a few different strategies during their first decade in power. First, the board created space for new schools by consolidating and reorganizing the city's white high schools. For instance, they combined Eastern Girls, Western Girls, Central Girls, and Louisville Commercial High Schools to create a single Louisville Girls High School. Commercial High School's male students transferred to Male High School, which then opened a commercial track. Second, the board created space at existing schools by purchasing portables sufficient to distribute excess students. Lastly, and most significantly, they redrew school district boundaries and abolished school choice. In Louisville, many students opted to go to schools other than the one closest to their home. The Board of Education now "compelled" them to attend the school in their district. The board reported that by filling the schools with vacancies they reduced overcrowding in other schools. The new board also continued the practice of housing new black schools in formerly white school facilities. For example, as previously mentioned, Central

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<sup>132</sup> "First Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from January 1, 1911, to July 1, 1912;" "Second Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1912, to June 30, 1913."



Colored High School moved into a former white education facility in 1916. Additionally, to relieve congestion at Central Colored (Elementary) School, a new black elementary school opened in the fall of 1912 in a building that used to serve white children from the tenth ward. In the first report of the new Board of Education, President I. N. Bloom reported that one new facility for black students opened. Lincoln Colored School was one of only two new school buildings that opened in their first year and a half of leadership. However, it is important to note that the old, ward-elected board set the Lincoln school in motion. Bloom lamented the amount of money spent on the Lincoln Colored School:

The Lincoln [Colored] School had just been begun under the old School Board, but, unfortunately, its policy of giving out the contracts piecemeal made it necessary to spend a very large amount of money in its completion. It cost us \$78,077.91, but is perhaps one of the best built schools for colored people in the South.<sup>133</sup>

In this same report, Bloom reported the successful completion of the Broadway School, the only other new school facility opened that year, at a cost of \$184,984. While the old board also launched the construction of that white school facility,

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Bloom did not complain about its cost, despite its being more than double that of Lincoln Colored School.<sup>134</sup>

In addition to lessening overcrowding in Louisville schools, the Board of Education invested a great deal of time and money in creating healthy conditions in the schools. All of the city's schools, including colored schools, received new sanitary drinking fountains in their hallways. They eliminated stove heating in as many schools as they could afford. They also upgraded toilet facilities in a number of buildings. The board reported that they focused on improving schools in the city's poorer areas. Over half of the buildings that received heating and toilet upgrades were black schools. The Board of Education also invested in 14,000 new single desks over their first four years in power. They believed two-person or group desks were less clean and did not give students as much room to breathe. Since there were about 30,000 students in the schools at this time, 14,000 single desks would have a significant impact, and by the 1913-1914 school year all of Louisville's students, black or white, could all sit at their own single desk. Another point of concern related to students' health was nutrition. The board evaluated the lunch options available at the city's schools and found them to be lacking. They then launched a healthy school lunch program that would spread slowly over the next few years, moving to new schools when the board could afford to do so. There was even an initiative to make sure the size and position of blackboards in schools met the board's standard. They believed that standing at the chalkboard to write was preferable to doing all writing practice while seated at a desk. As such, the blackboards needed to be sizable enough to accommodate a large number of students

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<sup>134</sup> "First Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from January 1, 1911, to July 1, 1912."

and the blackboard had to be hung so as to avoid “many of the dangers of improper position.”<sup>135</sup>

Significant changes took place for teaching under the new Board of Education, beginning with how teachers were hired. While their preference for teachers from Louisville’s normal schools remained, they reversed the previous precedent of hiring low-ranking graduates. The board’s report insinuates that these graduates received faculty positions for political or nepotistic reasons. Going forward, the superintendent made offers to new faculty in order of the normal school graduate’s rank. This change is in step with the board’s promise to remove politics from education. Across the board, teachers received pay raises. However, Superintendent Holland emphasized that Louisville teacher salaries (and spending on schools in general) were still far below those in similarly sized metropolitan areas. In an effort to retain good teachers, the board also created the Teachers’ Annuity Fund Act, which put up to \$400 per year toward their retirement. In addition to monetary improvements, the board also wanted to reduce teachers’ workloads. One means of accomplishing that goal was through the previously discussed reduction of class sizes and overcrowding. Another was reorganizing course assignments by subject. This was already the case in the high schools, which were organized by department. The board spread this practice into the seventh and eighth grades in all schools, both black and white. By focusing on one or two topics, the board believed faculty would teach more effectively and spend less time on lesson plans.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1914.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

In addition to facility and faculty improvements, the new board strove to improve the quality of academic offerings. The first three years they purchased 50,000 new textbooks and spent thousands of dollars of new globes and maps. Black schools received their share of new supplies, including new chemistry laboratory equipment at Central Colored High School. The board created a partnership with Louisville's public library system to collaborate on programming. From example, when students in the city were reading a particular assigned book the libraries would have programming related to that book. The most significant change was the board's creation of three new departments: primary work, physical training, and manual training and domestic science. All three department supervisors directly worked with faculty and answered to the superintendent. The primary work supervisor focused on streamlining curriculum to assure that all students advancing through the grades received the same standard of education. The physical training supervisor sought to improve the health and focus of students through exercise. The professionalization of this department looked to move physical activity beyond simple recess.<sup>137</sup>

The creation of the manual training and domestic science department had the greatest impact on education in Louisville. The Board of Education and their superintendents consistently expressed a desire to expand manual training and domestic science class offerings into all ward schools. Ultimately, they hoped to train students for both skilled and semi-skilled occupations. Prominent members of the Louisville Commercial Club, an organization that played a starring role in the creation of the new board and the election of those they deemed to be viable candidates, were

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

in full support of the new board increasing vocational training in Louisville schools. Almost immediately upon the new board members taking power, four Commercial Club members collectively donated \$6400 to fund equipment for domestic science and manual training. This equipment would go to eleven schools, eight white and three black. In their first annual report, published in 1913, the board reported that during the 1910-1911 school year 600 students took classes in domestic science and manual training. However, thanks to the generous Commercial Club members' donation and some restructuring, between 3,800 and 3,900 students took such courses in the 1911-1912 school year. This number would continue to grow throughout the decade.<sup>138</sup>

The new board was not out on a limb with this initiative; education reformers throughout the country encouraged practical courses, especially for low-income students for whom they believed classical academic curriculum was of little use. In its first annual report, the Board of Education stated that cities in the "same class" as Louisville, including Cincinnati, Cleveland, Rochester, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee, had all established similar initiatives. Superintendent Holland reported that an increase in manual training and domestic sciences offerings would "be especially helpful to the hundreds of boys and girls who will never be able to enter our high schools." The Board of Education's reports and minutes throughout their first decade in office repeated these sentiments, such as when they fought for increased school funding:

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<sup>138</sup> "First Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from January 1, 1911, to July 1, 1912."

A city which fails to support its public school system sufficiently well to enable the Board of Education to give proper preparation to the thousands of boys and girls who must enter the factories and the shops, will eventually be compelled to spend a great deal more money in the upkeep of reformatories and the giving out of charity, which would not be needed if each generation were given the instruction that is today demanded in the industrial life of a city.<sup>139</sup>

While the intentions of the board were transparent on the issue of student's socio-economic status and their desire to prepare them for a life of labor, they were less vocal on the topic of race. However, the record attests that the new board increasingly required a higher proportion of manual training and domestic science courses for black students than for white. Furthermore, the Board of Education knowingly structured these courses to train black students for careers that the board members deemed appropriate for African-Americans. The next chapter explores this specific topic in-depth.<sup>140</sup>

By the late 1910s, the Board of Education fulfilled their promises to their supporters to implement a broad spectrum of ideas popular in the school reform movement. For teachers, they removed politics and nepotism from the hiring processes, created a retirement plan, and sought to increase teacher salaries. For

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1920.

students, they decreased overcrowding in classrooms, improved the health conditions at virtually all schools, and purchased a bevy of new materials and updated textbooks. For curriculum reformers, they dramatically increased the amount of manual training and domestic service courses offered, especially at schools in low-income areas, and appointed administrators to streamline curriculum in many subjects. As the Board of Education moved into their second decade in power, they sustained virtually all of this progress. However, whatever other significant reforms they might have sought to implement went on hold as they focused their energies on coping with a dramatic increase in the city's population in the 1920s.

During the first decade of the new board's leadership, the enrolled student population hovered between 27,000 and just under 31,000 in any given school year. In the following decade, student enrollment ballooned to almost 50,000 by the 1929-1930 school year. Interestingly, while the African-American student population grew from 5,552 in 1919-1920 to 8,348 in 1929-1930, the percentage of African-American students in the system actually dropped slightly from about nineteen percent to just under seventeen percent. The primary cause of this major increase in population after the Great War was Louisville's industrial growth that attracted new workers to the city. Additionally, the board reports show that fewer students left school early to enter the workforce compared to prior decades, perhaps because Louisville's strong job market freed families from a need for additional income. Regardless of the cause, Louisville's Board of Education bore the task of providing for their growing student population with little help from the state government.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> "Ninth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1919, to June 30, 1920;" "Nineteenth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1929, to June 30, 1930;" Lacomis Coliver Curry, "A History

The Board of Education's creation of junior high schools was their primary solution to coping with such dramatic growth. To this point, Louisville schools offered eight years of elementary education and four years of high school education. In their annual report for 1924-1925, the board noted that the school system carried 8,000 more students than their standard capacity. They also identified that approximately 8,000 students in the school system were in the seventh through ninth grades. They devised a plan to create junior high schools and house them in newly built or purchased facilities, thus relieving existing elementary and high school facilities of their student surpluses. This plan also included additions to other existing schools. To fund this plan, the Board of Education proposed two bonds, one for five million in 1925 and another in 1929 for three million. Voters approved the bonds, enabling the Board of Education to implement their plan to shift students into junior high schools.<sup>142</sup>

As bond funds became available, the board authorized a flurry of construction projects including three white junior high schools completed in 1927. All that they accomplished for African-American students in that age range was to purchase a site for a black junior high at Jackson and Breckinridge Street. The first junior high to open for African-American students was Madison Street Junior High School in the spring of 1928. This school facility was not new, but an existing building that became available when its white students moved into one of the newly built junior high schools. However, the board did purchase an adjacent property on which they would

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of Industrial Education for Males at Central High School" (master's thesis, University of Louisville, 1957).

<sup>142</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1923-1930.



build a new addition for the Madison Street School. This addition opened in the spring of 1930. Meanwhile, construction on a new facility for a black junior high began at the previously purchased Jackson Street lot. When Jackson Street Junior High School opened its doors in the fall of 1929, all agreed that it was one of the most attractive schools for African-Americans in the city. Unfortunately, they shared a cramped lot with Booker T. Washington (formerly Eastern Colored) Elementary, which took away from the building's beauty. Regardless, by the end of the decade, the board completed their project, having constructed seven junior high schools—five white and two black.<sup>143</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The first two decades with the new Board of Education provided mixed results for Louisville's African-American schools. Losing political capital over their ward-based board members dramatically reduced the black community's ability to affect change in their schools. Only white flight in the 1960s restored this loss of influence. As a result, white schools received first priority when funding for new facilities became available. The new board perpetuated the cycle of moving black students into former white school buildings. Another major blow to Louisville's black schools under the new board was the increasing differentiation of the curriculum at black and white schools. Under the ward-based board, all pre-high school curriculum remained equalized in law and in practice. By contrast, the new board delivered curriculum to

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<sup>143</sup> "Sixteenth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1926, to June 30, 1927."

students based on their socioeconomic status and race (the new board's handling of curriculum matters is the subject of the next chapter). Despite the shortcomings, the new school board fulfilled their duty of improving facilities in schools housing pupils of all colors. Additionally, they did seek to expand the academic offerings for the city's students, however biased or unequal they became.

It was fortunate for the city of Louisville that its Board of Education focused their energies on growing their facilities during the prosperous 1920s. Once the Great Depression set in, the board was not in a position to spend money on new equipment, facilities, or pay raises. With the fall of the nation's economy, Louisville's African-American students and faculty bore the brunt of the cuts in the school system. Yet even under such circumstances, the decades of the 1930s and 1940s ushered in a new era where the African-American community sought equality for the city's black schools.

## **Chapter 5**

### **INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES, INCREASED INEQUALITY, 1894-1920**

#### **Introduction**

The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries experienced three significant trends that had a direct impact on African-American education. Beginning in the 1890s, vocational education gained in popularity throughout the United States and Europe. This movement coincided with the rise of Booker T. Washington, whose education philosophy focused on practical training in areas where African-Americans were most likely to find employment. In the South, this period saw a dramatic decline in political power and influence for African-Americans, which typically resulted in major setbacks for the education of black children.

Louisville's African-American public school students felt the impact of all three of these trends. Black educators introduced vocational courses into the public schools in the 1890s for the express purpose of job-readiness. While Louisville's African-Americans only partially embraced his philosophy, Booker T. Washington was a popular figure in the city. The change to a new Louisville school board and a new election process for that board in 1910 dramatically reduced the African-American community's political leverage and ability to enhance their black public schools. This new board ardently advocated for and increased vocational programming for all of its schools, but did so in a way that dramatically increased inequality between white and black school offerings. Louisville's Board of Education intentionally chose the type and level of curriculum suitable for students at its schools

based on both their economic standing and their race. The chasm between the offerings for male students at Central Colored High School versus those in the Louisville's white male high schools are the most egregious examples of this inequality— an inequality that persisted until the early 1950s.

### **Introduction of Manual Training in Louisville's African-American Schools**

After the Civil War, as educational opportunities for freedmen flourished, most black educators favored the New England classical liberal curriculum taught in most northern schools. This was the case at all levels, elementary through collegiate. In Louisville, such an education for African-Americans began prior to the Civil War in the private, church-based schools the local black community developed and this curriculum continued in the public schools created in 1870. For example, a first year high school student's curriculum at Central High School in the early 1890s consisted of "English, Latin, Algebra to Quadratics, Physiology, Ancient History, Drawing and Music." While primarily academic track or college preparatory curriculum remained the focus of black schools in Louisville, black educators in Louisville introduced vocational training, also called manual training, to its African-American public schools in the 1890s. In doing so, Louisville's black public schools participated in a worldwide trend.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 28-29; J. Stoddard Johnston, ed., *Memorial History of Louisville From its First Settlement to the Year 1896, Volume One* (New York: American Biographical Pub. Co., 1896) 242.

The rise of vocational education began in Germany, where its industrial schools received significant credit for that nation's economic rise in the second half of the twentieth century. This worries other nations who feared losing the fight for economic supremacy. While the nature of vocational education varied from country to country, most of Europe and the United States introduced vocational curriculums before the advent of the Great War. Vocational education attracted a broad spectrum of support in the United States: business leaders, labor leaders, educators, liberal reformers, African-American reformers, and others. These groups regularly disagreed about the purpose and delivery of vocational education, but remained unified in supporting its implementation. Just as there were a variety of supporters, there were a number of reasons for the rapid spread of this form of education. First, the industrial revolution created a demand for a new type of skilled laborer. Widespread vocational training allowed a state or nation to graduate technically proficient laborers. Second, compulsory education laws became more common, and education experts viewed vocational training as the most practical approach to educating the children of immigrants and those of lower socio-economic status who had previously been excluded from schooling. Those in power claimed that traditional education was wasted on this new wave of students. Lastly, revisionists argue that capitalist businessmen and industrialists believed vocational training could instill capitalist values and a respect for manual labor in students, thus creating an ideal laborer. Vocational training through the public education system also freed corporations from footing the bill for training young people in a number of occupations.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Aaron Benavot, "The Rise and Decline of Vocational Education, *Sociology of Education*" *Sociology of Education* 56, no. 2 (April 1983): 63-76; Harvey Kantor "Work, Education, and Vocational Reform: The Ideological Origins of Vocational

Two of these explanations for the rise in popularity of vocational or manual training relate to strategies pertaining to African-American education in the post-Reconstruction South. Just as many educators believed vocational training was more appropriate for immigrant children than a traditional academic education, so too did they think such training was better suited for the freedmen's children. Just as industrialists believed vocational training would instill a respect for work in a factory, so too did southern plantation owners believe it could produce a hardworking and obedient agricultural and low-wage labor force. One of the most famous advocates of educating African-Americans for this expressed purpose was Samuel Chapman Armstrong, best known for his Hampton Institute.<sup>146</sup>

Just as the former slaves in the South worked to create educational opportunities for their youth, opportunities intended to help them rise above their current station in life, Samuel Chapman Armstrong developed an approach to education with the specific intent of maintaining the traditional power structure of the South. Armstrong's Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute opened its doors in 1868 with a focus on teacher training, and offered trade certificates beginning in 1895. All students participated in extensive manual labor, in both fields and small shops. Armstrong believed this taught them the dignity of hard work, which they would then pass along to the communities where they would serve as teachers. He developed a

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Education, 1890-1920" *American Journal of Education* 94, no. 4 (August 1986): 401-426.

<sup>146</sup> Regina Werum, "Sectionalism and Racial Politics: Federal Vocational Policies and Programs in the Predesegregation South" *Social Science History* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 399-453.

specific type of teacher, one with barely more than an elementary education and a strong work ethic, to educate Southern black youth on the benefits of agricultural labor. Even those students who received trade certificates remained in trades considered appropriate for blacks in the South. Hampton Institute's purpose was to educate the freedmen to become hard workers who knew their place in southern society. This was an approach geared to keep African-Americans out of politics and in the fields. In other words, the Hampton model's approach was in direct opposition to the values cultivated by classical education.<sup>147</sup>

Armstrong's agenda was not a secret, but he rebranded his approach as "self-help" when presenting to African-Americans. His most effective advocate in the African-American community was Booker T. Washington. A former student at the Hampton Institute and protégé of Armstrong, Washington "sought to apply the Hampton doctrines to economic interdependence, racial separation, and industrial education" throughout the South. Washington opened the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in 1881 for the express purpose of educating students for the kinds of work available to them in the South. While his mentor Armstrong's motives for giving African-Americans a vocational education were racist, Washington genuinely believed that traditional forms of education did not prepare Southern blacks for gainful employment. This was very much in keeping with the ideology of many of the groups promoting vocational training, who believed the typical literary curriculum did little to prepare students for a life in the workforce. Tuskegee's training for male students prepared them for work at a farm, printing office, brickyard, and blacksmith shop—all

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<sup>147</sup> Anderson, 32-78.

trades the southern elite deemed appropriate for African-Americans. Female students at the institute learned sewing, laundry, and home economics—preparing them for little more than domestic service or homemaking. Just as with the Hampton Institute, the majority of graduates became teachers in the South. Many criticized Washington for preparing his students for service positions, but Washington believed it was an important first step for African-Americans, “The surest way for the Negro to reach the highest positions is to prepare himself to fill well at the present time the basic occupations. This will give him a foundation upon which to stand while securing what is [sic] called the more exalted positions.”<sup>148</sup>

Washington’s views on black self-help and vocational education went mainstream after his speech at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895 catapulted him to national celebrity. This speech encouraged African-Americans to remain in the South (“Cast down your bucket where you are.”) and develop their skills in agriculture, domestic service, and other trades where blacks could find employment in the region. Washington further enhanced his public profile with the publication of his autobiography *Up from Slavery* in 1901. By documenting his own extraordinary rise, he set himself up as a model for what was possible through his philosophy of self-help. The rise in the popularity of vocational education coincided with his own, which enhanced Washington’s ability to advocate a certain kind of education for African-Americans. The number of schools named after Washington are a testament to his

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<sup>148</sup> James D. Anderson, “Black Rural Communities and the Struggle for Education during the Age of Booker T. Washington, 1877-1915,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 67, no. 4, A Look at Rural Education in the United States (Summer 1990): 46-62; Raymond Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 49.



influence in education. Today there are more than 45 schools that bear his name, though dozens more schools named after him have closed or been consolidated over the years. From example, Louisville's Eastern Colored School bore Booker T. Washington's name beginning in 1915, but the school is no longer open.<sup>149</sup>

Washington's ideas and the larger trend toward more vocational education would have an impact on black educators in Louisville. Albert E. Meyzeek, an African-American educational leader in the city, introduced vocational training into its black public schools. In fact, Meyzeek introduced vocational curriculum at Central in 1894, where he served as principal of the high school, thus slightly predating Washington's rise to fame. At this time, there was no type of manual or domestic service training in any Louisville schools, whether black or white. The first course introduced was a sewing class for female students. Fifty girls and six teachers participated under the watchful eye of a sewing teacher from New York Public Schools who came in to help create the new program. The sewing program quickly expanded to serve female students at most of Louisville's black elementary schools,

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<sup>149</sup> Louisville's Booker T. Washington Elementary School served African-American students until the 1956 desegregation of public schools. The Board of Education then used the building primarily for Head Start and adult literacy programs. Those programs vacated the facility in the early 2000s and a developer purchased it from the Board in 2005.

James D. Anderson, "Black Rural Communities and the Struggle for Education during the Age of Booker T. Washington, 1877-1915," *Peabody Journal of Education* 67, no. 4, A Look at Rural Education in the United States (Summer 1990): 46-62; Wolters, 40-76; James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 33; "Frequently Asked Questions about The Booker T. Washington Society," Booker T Washington Society, <http://www.btwsociety.org/faq/>.

and in early June students displayed their work at a special exhibition. Within a few years, weaving joined sewing as part of the curriculum in black elementary schools.<sup>150</sup>

The Louisville School Board supported the expansion of manual training and domestic service courses for the city's black students. They believed in it so much that in 1896 the school board began to explore the possibility of creating a stand-alone manual training high school for African-American students. They appointed a committee to explore the costs and seriously entertained turning the old Central Colored School building at Sixth and Kentucky, out of which Central had moved in 1894, into that school. However, a petition from those living in the neighborhood against such a school led to the school board shelving the idea of a separate manual training school. In an effort not to totally leave out Central High School's young men, the school started offering woodwork courses for freshmen and sophomores in the fall of 1898. Woodworking was one of three electives that Central's male students could select. The other options were word analysis and drawing during freshmen year and Latin or drawing in their second year.<sup>151</sup>

Albert Meyzeek's faith in the merits of vocational training stemmed from his strong belief in black self-help as well as practical considerations. To help them find work as semi-skilled laborers, Meyzeek was quick to institute sloyd work (Swedish woodwork) courses for boys when he transferred to Eastern (later Booker T.

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<sup>150</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, March 20, 1894; March 31, 1894; June 9, 1894; September 4, 1894; September 14, 1901; July 6, 1902; Louisville School Board, Annual Report, 1897. Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY.

<sup>151</sup> Louisville School Board, Meeting Minutes, January 1896, January 1897, March 1897, June 1897.

Washington) Colored School. Domestic service was a primary source of employment for African-American women in Louisville, so when newspaper advertisements increasingly stated “white servant preferred,” Meyzeek instituted domestic science courses for girls at Eastern. His hope was that greater expertise among black domestic servants would dispel preferences for white help. Despite Eastern being a primary school, Meyzeek also taught students how to open a savings account, accrue interest, and use money wisely.<sup>152</sup>

While an advocate of practical training, Meyzeek was not interested in abandoning more traditional academic curriculum, nor was he a believer in Washington’s stance that equality should wait. His introduction of practical education never negated his advocacy for high quality, classic liberal curriculum in Louisville’s black schools. When he became principal of Central Colored High School in 1893, Meyzeek found it lacking in numerous areas: the high school curriculum was only three years, there was no library, and most teachers were not college-educated. During his brief tenure, Meyzeek raised Central High to a four-year curriculum. Meyzeek created a fourth-year curriculum that was decidedly academic: Literature and Reading, Latin, Rhetoricals, Psychology and Logic, Math, Physics, Arithmetic, Grammar, Geography, Music, and Drawing. Additionally, he hired better-educated teachers and got the library board to create a reading room his students could use until Central established a library. All of this he accomplished in only three years. Meyzeek

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<sup>152</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, July 6, 1902; George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 173-174; Louisville School Board, Meeting Minutes, January 1896, January 1897, March 1897, June 1897.

returned to the helm of Eastern Colored School when the previous Central principal returned.<sup>153</sup>

Meyzeek's vigorous efforts to start a public library for African-Americans in Louisville exemplify his commitment to traditional academic pursuits. He was responsible for the creation of the Louisville Western Colored Branch library, the first library in the nation to serve only African-American patrons and staffed exclusively with African-Americans. With funds secured from Andrew Carnegie's library initiative, Meyzeek built a new building for this branch that opened in 1908. This venture was so successful that Meyzeek convinced the city to establish the Eastern Colored Branch in another Carnegie-funded building in 1914. This made Louisville the only city in the country at that time with two libraries for African-Americans. Clearly, academic success remained of paramount importance to Meyzeek. Therefore, while Booker T. Washington believed a vocational education and work in a service position would create a foundation for future uplift for blacks, Meyzeek disagreed. He did not believe a traditional curriculum detracted from the practical goals of uplift. Meyzeek vigorously fought for improved facilities and opportunities for black students until he retired from the school system in 1943 after fifty years of service.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> John Benjamin Horton, *Old War Horse of Kentucky: A Gripping Biographical Narrative about the Life and Achievements of Albert Ernest Meyzeek* (Louisville: J.B. Horton & Associates, 1986); Thelma Cayne Tilford-Weathers, *A History of Louisville Central High School, 1882-1982* (Louisville: unknown, 1982) 1-16; Johnston, 200-250; Wright, 166-167.

<sup>154</sup> "A Separate Flame," Louisville Public Library, <http://www.lfpl.org/western/htmls/sepflame.htm>; Wright, 167.

Despite the city's commitment to a primarily academic curriculum for black students, the Hampton-Tuskegee Model received increased attention in the city after Booker T. Washington visited Louisville in 1902. Washington addressed Louisville's Normal School graduates in June of that year, making a strong impression on those in attendance. Many of those in the audience who listened to Washington graduated from Central High School a few weeks later. During their commencement, many of the class speakers urged their peers to lift themselves up through hard work and industry. While in Louisville on his visit, Washington also encountered Albert Meyzeek, then principal at Eastern, the school that would later bear Washington's name. On this visit, Washington observed the young men's sloyd work. The press coverage revealed that Eastern was the only school in the city with such a program and that Meyzeek managed to create the program with no additional funding from the school board.<sup>155</sup>

Despite Washington's popularity after his visit, the Hampton-Tuskegee Model never took hold in Louisville. The city was a large, urban center, and rural areas typically embraced the Hampton-Tuskegee model. For instance, the Hampton Institute had future teachers spend a good deal of time in the field plowing to teach them the benefits of manual labor, a value they would then pass along to their future students. Agricultural work was not a major employer of African-Americans in Louisville. Teachers in Louisville's Normal School would find such an approach a wasteful distraction. Second, like Meyzeek, most of Louisville's African-American leadership remained convinced of the essential role higher education played in improving the prospects of the city's black citizens. The presence of affluent blacks in the city

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<sup>155</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, May 31, 1902; June 21, 1902; July 6, 1902; Louisville School Board, Annual Report, 1901-1902; Horton, 1-39.

conceivably played a role in this dichotomy. These African-Americans fell squarely within the definition of DuBois' "talented tenth" and believed they were worthy of true equality and political influence. That said, they also recognized the importance of uplift for many in their local black community. The inclusion of manual training courses to supplement the African-American schools' classical liberal curriculum was the natural result of this viewpoint.<sup>156</sup>

As the black community continued to support a somewhat mixed curriculum, the school board continued to try to increase manual and domestic service training for black students. In 1905, local elites reopened the topic of a stand-alone African-American manual training school. The prominent local attorney Charles Stoll, along with a number of other top men in the city, sought to establish such a school in Louisville. Fundraising began with Stoll's pledge of \$2000, followed by a number of \$1000 pledges from other business leaders. Unfortunately, for this cause, the school board chose not to contribute the \$10,000 required to match the pledges. The movement for a stand-alone manual training school for African-Americans again faded away; however, the school board did take two major steps toward more manual training for black students. They voted to provide enough funds to build an annex at the Ninth and Magazine schoolhouse to increase space for Central's High School manual training courses and approved the creation of a manual training department once the supplementary building could be occupied. The decision not to create a separate manual training school for black students would have significant consequences for African-American education in Louisville. Had such a school

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<sup>156</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 79-109; Wright, 156-157.

existed, Central Colored High School would have been free to continue pursuing curriculum of an academic, college-preparatory nature with their existing manual training courses shifting to this new school. However, without a separate institution focusing on manual training for African-Americans, Central's curriculum was vulnerable to significant reform when the new Board of Education made major changes only a few years later.<sup>157</sup>

### **Changes to Elementary School Curriculum under the New Board of Education**

Historically, Louisville's black community supported a classical academic curriculum for their young people. When Louisville added public schools for African-Americans in 1870, the board dictated that the same curriculum be used in both black and white schools. This would remain true in primary schools for decades, but would not be the case for Central Colored High School given the diversity in curriculum among white high schools in Louisville. With the support of the black community, school leaders like Albert Meyzeek introduced some manual training courses in the 1890s, and many saw their value in students later securing good jobs. Other than a petition presented to the school board on behalf of the "black community" in 1897, there is no record of opposition to manual training in the school board records. By contrast, another petition from the community to the school board in 1902 called for more manual training for black students. Additionally, many African-Americans in

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<sup>157</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, January 16, 1905; February 23, 1905; June 5, 1906; September 4, 1906; Louisville School Board, Meeting Minutes, June 6, 1905; November 4, 1907; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, January 1911.

Louisville supported the drive to create a stand-alone manual training school for black students, which failed to launch in 1907 due to lack of support from the old board. As such, the black community overall supported an increase in training opportunities for their youth. However, in 1910 they could not have anticipated that the new Board of Education would eliminate the practice of offering the same courses to black and white elementary school students just as they began to increase the vocational training courses desired by Louisville's African-American community.<sup>158</sup>

As previously stated, when Louisville's school board extended public schools to the African-American community in 1870 the rules they created stated that faculties use the same curriculum in both black and white elementary education. Whether this was always the reality on the ground is unclear. However, there is no evidence to contradict this point. Also, this language remained in the public school board manual for decades. Under the new board, this would no longer be the case. The board's introduction of manual training and domestic service courses to elementary schools was not uniform. As a result, different elementary schools offered different courses from one another; this included variety in offerings among black elementary schools. One reason for the uneven rollout of these courses was financing. The board added new courses at schools when they could afford to buy and install the equipment. The cost of supplies and securing teachers also played a role in the seemingly sporadic enactment of these courses. Another factor contributing to the uneven curriculum

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<sup>158</sup> Louisville School Board, Meeting Minutes, February 1, 1897; *The Courier-Journal*, May 9, 1902.



offerings was the board's belief that certain courses were more appropriate in certain schools.<sup>159</sup>

As a result, the omnipresence of manual training courses in Louisville's black elementary schools resulted from, at best, elitism and, at worst, racism. The evidence for elitism is abundant. Not only did there begin to be divergence in black and white elementary curriculum, but also among white elementary schools based on the affluence of their neighborhood. For example, as of September 1911, the board offered industrial work courses for fifth and sixth grade students in seventeen white schools, which is just over half of the white elementary schools. Many white schools would remain solely focused on academic curriculum and never offered manual training or domestic courses. As the Supervisor of Manual Training and Domestic Service, Louis Bacon, said in his first report to the new board, "in the future, as the work develops, it would seem wise to discriminate somewhat between the different schools. Many of the schools are situated in neighborhoods where the present work is perhaps sufficient; but some are in those parts of town where very few pupils go to high school, and in these localities the grammar school is the only preparation the children have for entrance into remunerative employment—the factory or the shop." The reader gleans other examples of this elitism in the description of the manual training and domestic science courses' desired outcomes, such as how sewing classes helped "the pupil form habits of neatness, accuracy, order and cleanliness." Similar sentiments about uplifting the

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<sup>159</sup> "Rules Governing Ward Schools: Public Colored Schools." Louisville School Board, Annual Report, 1871-1872, 1897-1900; "Manual of the Board of Trustees of the Public Schools of Louisville," Louisville School Board, 1883; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1920.

children of the lower classes exist throughout the Board of Education's minutes and annual reports for more than a decade.<sup>160</sup>

In addition to their elitist motivations, the Board of Education began to differentiate elementary school curriculum based on race. This racism is most evident in the proportion of black elementary school courses focusing on domestic science and manual training. As mentioned, such courses were required in slightly more than half of white elementary schools, but the board required them in all black elementary schools. Additionally, by the board's fourth year in power, black students were spending twice as much time on those courses as their white counterparts. The only white students asked to spend as much time on manual and domestic service training were at the city's reform school and the special school for students with discipline problems. From there, the poorer the economic circumstances of a white school's students, the more their curriculum resembled the black elementary schools.<sup>161</sup>

In addition to the Board of Education requiring more manual training and domestic courses for black elementary schools than white, there would also begin to be differences in what types of courses schools they offered to black and white students. Beginning in the fourth grade, students at all elementary schools attended manual training courses segregated by gender. Girls generally focused on sewing while boys focused on woodwork, while all genders took bookmaking. However, fifth-grade boys in black schools at Eastern Colored School took ninety minutes of cooking classes a week beginning in the 1912-1913 school year. While cooking

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<sup>160</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1920.

<sup>161</sup> "Third Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1913, to June 30, 1914."

classes existed for girls at black and white elementary schools, the Board of Education never required it of boys at white elementary schools. Additionally, white girls took only two years of cooking in the seventh and eighth grades, while black girls took three years from sixth through eighth grade. Also in 1912-1913, a pre-vocational school for white boys and girls opened, teaching such courses as cabinetmaking, bookbinding, and printing. Some white elementary schools even had classes on electrical wiring. Meanwhile, laundry courses began at black elementary schools alone. These dichotomies were some of many instances where the new board created courses for students along racial lines.<sup>162</sup>

While the Board of Education espoused a doctrine of uplift for working class students through manual training and domestic service courses, in practice many of the courses for African-Americans seemed designed less for vocational preparation and more for improving their ability to withstand a life of poverty. Beginning in 1914, the board began to install motor-driven sewing machines in white schools. With these machines, beginning in the fifth grade, girls would learn to construct and make entire garments. These machines gave girls experience they could use to secure a factory job where such machines were in use. The Louisville Prevocational School, opened by the board in 1913 for white seventh and eighth graders, took this to the next level by having female students create dresses that they sold to customers in the community. As reported by the board, these classes reflected work in a regular dressmaking shop and customers paid slightly less than they would for similar clothing elsewhere. By contrast, black female students sewing courses focused on keeping garments viable for

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<sup>162</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1920.

as long as possible. Students brought garments to class and tailored them to fit a younger sibling; they created smaller garments out of damaged clothes, they mended clothes with minor issues, and they learned various methods of stain removal. A similar situation arose for male students. While many white schools taught shoemaking, the board limited black schools to shoe repair courses. Male students repaired the shoes of their fellow students with the expressed intention of keeping children in school who would otherwise have stayed home from lack of proper footwear. Community members and staff also donated old shoes that the boys repaired and then sold to fellow students at a cheap price. While there is value in students knowing how to take care of clothing and keep shoes fit enough for use, there was little to no vocational value when compared to the courses at white elementary schools.<sup>163</sup>

In the latter 1920s, when the Board of Education launched a junior high school system for both black and white students in an effort to relieve congestion at elementary and high schools, they continued their practice of providing unequal curriculum. In an even starker dichotomy than in the elementary schools, students in the newly formed African-American junior high schools spent as much time in manual training and domestic service as they did in traditional academic courses. Curriculum discrepancies, like how only black male junior high school students took laundry, also established themselves in these new schools.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1913-1915, 1916-1918.

<sup>164</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1927-1930.

Another instance of curriculum discrimination was in the board's dealings with the city's best and brightest students. When they came into office, the new board began to offer courses for "exceptional" students. In their annual reports, they discussed the extension of the exceptional programs into a growing number of white elementary schools, but they never made their way into the African-American schools, nor was there even a mention of the possibility of such an expansion of the exceptional student offerings.<sup>165</sup>

The historical record makes it clear that Louisville's Board of Education created curriculum for its elementary level students with regard to race and socio-economic status. What remains unclear is the reaction to these distinctions in the African-American community. The local white press does not discuss the topic and the city's only African-American press at this time, the Louisville Leader, is no more revealing.<sup>166</sup> The only insight available comes from faculty remarks in the school board records. Overall, there is clear support from black teachers and administrators for manual training and domestic service courses. Their statements refer to such offerings as a means of racial uplift and preparation for future occupations. Beyond these types of statements of support, the record becomes less clear. No black educator openly condemns the racist and elitist course discrimination, but they make numerous requests over the years for new training programs. Lucie DuValle, the first female principal in Louisville's history, regularly made such requests for Phillis Wheatley Colored School. While the shoe repair programs at black schools clearly served the

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<sup>165</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1912-1914.

<sup>166</sup> This is primarily because so many editions were lost to fire and water damage.

purpose of keeping poor children in shoes instead of teaching them how to get a job manufacturing shoes, it was Principal DuValle herself who initiated the shoe repairing courses at her school. However, she also made requests for proper sewing machines and courses more akin to what the board provided in many white schools.<sup>167</sup>

Just as the new Board of Education altered the curriculum of Louisville's black elementary schools, resulting in unequal and inferior courses offerings, so too did they launch a major overall of Central Colored High School

### **Major Changes for High Schools under the New Board of Education**

While the Board of Education altered what had once been an equalized elementary school curriculum, Louisville's high school curriculums had always been diverse. From their inception, each Louisville high school had distinctive programs and these differences would continue, and deepen, when the new Board of Education took power in 1911. Louisville had seven high schools when the new Board of Education took over: Male, Manual, Central Girls, Eastern Girls, Western Girls, Commercial, and Central Colored. Louisville Male High School opened in 1856; the city created this school for the express purpose of preparing its brightest students for admission to colleges and universities. Louisville Female High School, which over time became Louisville Girls' High School, opened the same year as its male counterpart. Its students focused on academic and commercial courses. Manual High School opened in 1892. While its name implied a manual training curriculum, the

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<sup>167</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, 1911-1923; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports 1911-1920.

school focused on training young men for careers in engineering and applied science. Central Colored High School launched to train future teachers in 1874, and did not offer a full four-year academic track curriculum until 1893. Its academic program had greater similarities to the Female High academic track curriculum than the two male high schools' offerings.<sup>168</sup>

As previously discussed, the new Board of Education believed there was nothing wrong with having different school curriculums for different types of students. As such, the divergent high school curriculums were in keeping with their values. However, another primary value of the new board was streamlining the school system to save money. The board was eager to reduce the costs of running the various high schools since high school students made up only ten percent of the students in the system, but they utilized just under thirty percent of the city's school budget. This was the primary motivator in their merging the three branches of the Girls High School (Central, Eastern, and Western) and the female students from Louisville Commercial High School into an enlarged Louisville Girls High School in 1912. In 1915, the board merged Male and Manual High Schools into Louisville Boys High School for the

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<sup>168</sup> Margaret Margaret Bell, "Louisville Male High School," Jefferson County Public School Archives Wiki, [http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/b1f64/Louisville\\_Male\\_High\\_School.html](http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/b1f64/Louisville_Male_High_School.html); Margaret Margaret Bell, "Louisville Girls High School," Jefferson County Public School Archives Wiki, [http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/150a1/Louisville\\_Girls\\_High\\_School.html](http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/150a1/Louisville_Girls_High_School.html); Margaret Margaret Bell, "duPont Manual High School," Jefferson County Public School Archives Wiki, [http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/591e5/duPont\\_Manual\\_High\\_School.html](http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/591e5/duPont_Manual_High_School.html); Louisville School Board, Annual Reports, 1895-1900; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports 1911-1922.

same reasons, but this merger was a failure and the board divided the schools for the 1919-1920 school year. Once separated, Male High School became more deeply committed to its college preparatory curriculum and saw an increase in students opting for that course of study. By 1923, an estimated eighty percent of Male's graduating class went on to a college education. Manual also updated its course requirements to be "especially strong in mathematics, science, and those subjects leading to the different engineering occupations." Manual's faculty accomplished this by reducing foreign language requirements, instituting more challenging math courses like trigonometry, and adding courses in engineering and practical mechanics. While the board consolidated the various male and female high schools, there was never a discussion of similar changes for Central Colored High School. There was no option to integrate Central's students into the white high schools since the Kentucky legislature forbade racial mixing in schools with the Day Law of 1904.<sup>169</sup>

While Male and Manual High Schools continued their focused academic tracks, the board turned their attention to career-oriented training at the other high schools. With the dramatic increase in manual and domestic science courses at the elementary level for most white students and all black students, the board took action to extend those courses into the remaining high schools' curriculums. They added a Home Economics track to Girls High School, which had Academic and Commercial programs. Just as Male and Manual fostered career outcomes for their students, so too did the tracks at Girls High School. Commercial students expected to enter the work force as stenographers, bookkeepers, and other white-collar careers open to young

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<sup>169</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1914-1915, 1919-1920.



women. Academic track participants were bound for college or a life as a leader of society, or perhaps both. Home economics intended to make young women efficient homemakers or capable of entering the semi-skilled labor force. Despite the Board of Education's affection for manual and domestic training, the vast majority of Girls High School students preferred the academic and commercial tracks with less than four percent enrolled in the Home Economics track most years.<sup>170</sup>

Given the Board of Education's emphasis on preparing students for work, it is surprising it took some years before the board operated a proper trade high school. The record gives three possible explanations. First, such schools were very expensive since they required industrial machinery and supplies. Second, Louisville's labor unions initially resisted anything that might undercut their apprentice system. Lastly, there had been plans to expand Manual's curriculum to include manual training, but this plan never took off as the school increased the rigor of their science and mathematics curriculum. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising the move toward creating a proper trade program began with an experimental school conducted by the Consumers League of Louisville around 1914. Once this school proved sustainable with funding from the Smith-Hughes Act, the Board of Education took it over around 1918 and named it the Louisville Vocational School. A few years later, it would be philanthropist Theodore Ahrens who transitioned this vocational school into a viable high school alternative. Ahrens donated \$150,000 to the school board for the construction of a proper trade school building on the understanding that the board considered it a high school and operated it as such. They agreed and Ahrens Trade

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<sup>170</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1921-1931.

High School formally opened its doors in 1926, focusing on training white students, both male and female, for skilled trades. While at Ahrens, students prepared for specific careers in mechanics, carpentry, plumbing, electric installation, printing, masonry, dressmaking, and millinery. Once open, Ahrens received a flood of support and donations from various organizations, including another \$700,000 over the next few years from Theodore Ahrens alone. Ahrens Trade High School was the crowning success of the new Board of Education. The school was an unrivaled success, supported by the approval of and integration with Louisville's labor unions and key industries.<sup>171</sup>

The high school tracks available in Louisville, especially those for young men, fulfilled a vision for education that had come into fruition in Europe at the turn of the century and had been spreading in America ever since. Reformers envisioned three tiers of education for students of different backgrounds. First, there was the traditional academic track intended for the most affluent and talented students (Male High School), then there were those programs to enable middle class children access to management or white-collar positions (Manual High School), and then the third track provided technical training for lower-class youth in skilled trades (Ahrens Trade School). While the class distinctions in Louisville were never as thickly drawn as in Europe, the city's Board of Education took pride in creating varied opportunities. As

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<sup>171</sup> <sup>171</sup> Margaret Margaret Bell, "Ahrens High School," Jefferson County Public School Archives Wiki, [http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/ded00/Ahrens\\_High\\_School.html](http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/ded00/Ahrens_High_School.html); Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1930; *The Courier-Journal*, December 24, 1924; January 7, 1925; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, 1920-1930.

educational reformers, they fulfilled their goal of utilizing education as preparation for the work force. As stated by the president of the Muncie, Indiana, school board in the 1920s, “For a long time all boys were trained to be President. Then for a while, all boys were trained to be professional men. Now we are training boys to get jobs.”<sup>172</sup>

Central Colored High School would never fall squarely under any of the three strata created by the Board of Education for white students. When Central Colored School began offering high school courses, the expressed intent was to train future teachers to meet the city’s needs in the growing number of black elementary schools. Once Central Colored High School became a four-year program in 1893, students received an education geared toward preparing them for college. For the most part, Central’s four-year curriculum resembled the academic track at Girls High School. There were some exceptions: instead of botany and German Central offered physics and political economy, for exam[;e. These alterations did not suggest any perceived inability by African-American students to learn those topics, and was a product of the topics Central faculty felt comfortable teaching. As previously discussed, manual training crept into Central’s curriculum as electives, beginning with the introduction of sewing for female students in 1894 and woodwork class for male students in 1898. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Louisville School Board regularly discussed manual training for black students, but in 1905 they chose to reject the creation of a stand-alone manual training school for African-American students. Instead, they chose to establish a manual training and domestic service department at

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<sup>172</sup> Kantor, 401-426; Benavot, 63-76.

Central and build an annex at Ninth and Magazine streets to house this new venture. This new facility opened in 1907. Given the voracity with which the new Board of Education pursued and expanded manual and domestic service training for black elementary school students when they took power in 1911, it comes as no surprise that they would follow a similar course in altering Central's high school curriculum.<sup>173</sup>

While the citizens of Louisville never embraced the Hampton model of education for African-Americans, the new Board of Education aimed to create something similar. Just as Samuel Chapman Armstrong created Tuskegee to cultivate African-Americans for vocations deemed acceptable for them by Southern elites, so too did the Board of Education aim to train black students for the types of employment they deemed most realistic. Therefore, while they busied themselves training Male High School students for universities and Manual High School students for work in the sciences, educators in Louisville worked to prepare Central Colored High School students for work in the service industry and similar fields.

Under the old school board, manual training and domestic service courses were electives, but by 1915, the new board required that all Central students take two years of these courses regardless of their course program. By 1918, they required all Central students to take manual training and domestic service courses during all four years of their high school careers. Manual training and domestic service became an official track, in addition to the existing college preparatory and teacher training tracks.

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<sup>173</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 6, 1892; March 20, 1894; January 16, 1905; February 23, 1905; June 5, 1906; September 4, 1906; Louisville School Board, Meeting Minutes, June 14, 1897; June 6, 1905; November 4, 1907; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, January 1911.

Students in manual training took a wide range of topics in their first two years before focusing on more specific skills in their junior and senior years. Prior to the new board, the only manual training courses taught to male students were cabinetmaking and mechanical drawing. Five years into the new tenure of the board, Central provided house framing, metalwork, cement and concrete work, molding, blacksmithing, and automobile courses.<sup>174</sup>

In 1916, Central Colored High School moved to Ninth and Chestnut Streets. This move made Central a standalone high school, no longer sharing a facility with an elementary school program. However, manual training courses remained at the Ninth and Magazine annex since the new building could not accommodate the manual training department. This was not a major inconvenience to students since Magazine Street is two blocks away from Chestnut Street. In addition to not being included in the move to Central's new building, it was common for manual training students at Central to provide free labor to improve their facilities. As part of the homebuilding course, students enlarged the blacksmith and molding shops. The concrete work class poured the floor in that same building to supplement this work. Due to concerns over a lack of space in the automobile classroom, the Board of Education approved a request to allow students to build a new garage on the block housing the Ninth and Magazine annex. Faculty and students from virtually every manual training course participated in this project. The only tasks not completed by the department were the plumbing, wiring, and roofing. When Central needed an extensive driveway to connect an

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<sup>174</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1916, 1918-1919; Lacomis Coliver Curry, "A History of Industrial Education for Males at Central High School" (master's thesis, University of Louisville, 1957).

athletic field to Ninth Street, manual training students planned and completed the driveway. While there is no question such work was good practice and relevant to their coursework, there is no record of white students doing similar work to their school facilities during this period.<sup>175</sup>

In general, when the records discuss manual training courses they are referring to classes available to male students. The female equivalent courses were under the heading of domestic science. As articulated in the 1918-1919 Board of Education's annual report:

The purpose of this department is to teach every girl to become useful to herself and to contribute to the welfare of society. Girls trained in a thorough knowledge and skillful performance of home duties will have a wholesome effect upon the community life. The course offers in domestic science the preparation and cooking of wholesome food, knowledge of food values, canning and preserving, marketing, and the serving of meals. In domestic art the course offers plain sewing, measuring, drafting, cutting, fitting, garment making, and a knowledge

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<sup>175</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1919; Curry, 22-62.

of the different kinds and strength of materials. Elementary principles in millinery are taught to the girls. Many learn to make their own hats.<sup>176</sup>

Central's faculty and the Board of Education made far fewer adjustments to the domestic science side of the track than to the manual training courses, except for requiring at least a few of these courses for all female students and increasing the amount of time they spent in those courses.<sup>177</sup>

An examination of the manual training and domestic science department at Central Colored High School reveals two key problems. The first is that the classes provided at Central did not give students the skills they needed to enter the workforce in skilled positions. The second is the increasing divergence between Central's course offerings compared to the curriculum offered at Louisville's white high schools.

The Board of Education and Central Colored High School records indicate that the manual training courses did not prepare young men for meaningful careers in those fields. For example, mechanical drawing classes did not produce workplace-ready draftsman, but instead laid a foundation for a student who might consider future training for a career in that area. It was often said that these courses should spark an interest in that field, help students discover if they had talent, or lay the groundwork for further study in that area. Another example is how the automotive classes taught the principles of how cars worked and how to drive them, but would not have prepared

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<sup>176</sup> "Eighth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1918, to June 30, 1919."

<sup>177</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1911-1925.

them for work in a proper automotive shop after graduation. It was akin to learning human anatomy but not having any lessons in diagnosis or treatment. In fact, the record regularly refers to automotive class as chauffeuring class, which reinforces the notion that board geared the course more toward a service profession than skilled labor. Additionally, in their instruction on concrete, they learned basic trowel work and finishing, but not the brickwork that could lead to a more lucrative, semi-skilled profession. Not a single manual training course prepared Central's young men for a skilled profession.<sup>178</sup>

Just as with the manual training and domestic service classes at the elementary schools, students at Central Colored High School did not receive offerings akin to those at the white high schools. African-American students in Louisville's public schools received only enough instruction in their manual training and domestic service courses to prepare them for the service sector or basic labor. By contrast, the offerings at Manual and Ahrens (a few years later) prepared its students for all manner of skilled professions. Students at white high schools received training approved by many local unions and were able to use their high school coursework to get their foot in the door with many skilled unions. White female students received adequate training for a career in dressmaking or, at the very least, to get a job in a factory working with industrial sewing machines. Meanwhile, domestic science courses at Central only

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<sup>178</sup> Curry, 22-62; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1912-1918.



prepared female students for low-wage work as domestic laborers, cooks, or homemakers.<sup>179</sup>

The lower quality training Central's students received stands in contrast with the fact that they spent more time in manual training and domestic science classes than white high school students. Central students on the manual training and domestic science track spent more time in those courses than in any other subject. The only academic subject that came close was English. White male students only spent more time in manual training courses than they did in foreign languages. Additionally, all students at Central were required to take manual training or domestic science courses; this was never a universal requirement at any of the white high schools.<sup>180</sup>

Despite the socio-economic biases that motivated the Board of Education's decision to increase manual training offerings at Central Colored High School, it was as an appropriate response to the substantial industrial growth Louisville experienced beginning in 1870. This growth continued through the first half of the twentieth century as companies like Ford Motor Company opened factories in the city and existing companies expanded. Within that larger trend of industrial growth in Louisville, there was a particularly significant upswing brought on by America's entry into the Great War. Additionally, research performed in the 1930s found that the courses created at this time did reflect the black job market. For instance, Central offered metalworking beginning in 1915 and that industry employed more blacks than any other industrial sector in both skilled and unskilled positions. Chauffeuring was

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<sup>179</sup> "Fifth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1915, to June 30, 1916."

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

also a common profession for black men in the city and that is why Central emphasized chauffeuring in their automotive course. For African-American women, being a domestic servant was Louisville's primary employment. Hence, the board's decision that sewing, laundry, and cooking courses were appropriate training for female African-American students. As such, the Board of Education is not guilty of attempting to denigrate the black students the city elected them to serve through the creation of these manual training and domestic service courses. Instead, the board is guilty of reinforcing the appropriateness of the careers where Louisville's business community already employed them. In essence, Louisville's public schools trained them to take their parents jobs and continue the status quo.<sup>181</sup>

As previously mentioned, it is difficult to ascertain how Louisville's black community felt about vocational training. Where information does exist in the historical record, it often indicates support for manual training, but not at the expense of quality academic offerings. For instance, in 1913, black community leaders requested both the creation of a commercial department at Central Colored High School and the expansion of manual training in African-American schools. At the same time, these leaders also pled for improvements to Central's college-preparatory track. The best source available for African-American reactions to manual training and domestic service programs in public schools come from the records of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association, commonly referred to as the K.N.E.A. This

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<sup>181</sup> Thelma Cayne Tilford, "A Survey of Business Education at Central High School from 1918 to 1954" (master's thesis, University of Louisville, 1954), 12-19; Atwood Sylvester Wilson, "The Vocational Opportunity and Education of Colored Pupils at Louisville" (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1934), 32-50, 65-79.

organization, based out of Louisville, served the entire state, but most of its leadership came from the state's urban centers.<sup>182</sup>

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the K.N.E.A. supported a variety of educational approaches. Most K.N.E.A. members were initially enthusiastic about the increase of manual training and domestic service courses offered in Louisville and elsewhere in the state, though a cohort of members insisted that classical liberal curriculum was the only path to uplift. For years, K.N.E.A. sponsored expositions where students won cash prizes for the goods they produced in woodwork, metalwork, sewing, and similar courses. At the organization's annual meeting in 1915, many engaged in what one might categorize as a DuBois versus Washington debate, but most of the meeting's energy went toward supporting manual training. However, in the latter half of the decade, the K.N.E.A. members agreed that students needed a liberal arts education, or at least some of those courses, if the black race would be able to uplift itself. It is likely that the growing disparity in courses offered between Louisville's black and white schools and the inferiority of Central's curriculum to the other white high schools influenced this shift.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, May 16- July 1, 1913; Kentucky Negro Educational Association Journal Collection, Kentucky Digital Library,  
[http://kdl.kyvl.org/catalog?q=Kentucky+Negro+Education+Association+Journal&search\\_field=all\\_fields&commit=search&commit=search](http://kdl.kyvl.org/catalog?q=Kentucky+Negro+Education+Association+Journal&search_field=all_fields&commit=search&commit=search).

<sup>183</sup> Proceedings of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association, 1901-1920, Kentucky Digital Library,  
[http://kdl.kyvl.org/catalog?q=Kentucky+Negro+Education+Association+Proceedings&search\\_field=all\\_fields&commit=search&commit=search](http://kdl.kyvl.org/catalog?q=Kentucky+Negro+Education+Association+Proceedings&search_field=all_fields&commit=search&commit=search).

Just as the Board of Education tailored most of the vocational course offerings to meet the needs to the Louisville workforce, they created a Commercial Department at Central Colored High School in 1918 to meet the growing demand for secretaries, clerks, and bookkeepers in the city's African-American business community. Members of the black community began making requests for a proper commercial training course at Central Colored High School years earlier and the record gives no indication as to why the board finally launched a Commercial Department at Central in the fall of 1918. Historically, the Board of Education expanded manual training opportunities in schools when they had the funds to pay for equipment, so it may simply be that 1918 was when they could afford to launch the program. This department immediately gained traction, with twenty-two students choosing the Commercial track. It was a two-year program with classes in stenography and typewriting, bookkeeping, commercial geography, commercial arithmetic, commercial law, business English, spelling and penmanship. The board paid for the construction of a portable specifically for use by the Commercial Department. It had two rooms divided by a wall with a glass window and glass door so a single teacher could observe two classes at once.<sup>184</sup>

While Central Colored High School's Manual Training Department failed to develop true job-ready skills in its students, Central's Commercial Department provided curriculum that was on par with commercial departments throughout the United States. While the courses changed from time to time— they added a shorthand course, replaced commercial law with business law, etc. — the department's core

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<sup>184</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1917-1918, 1918-1919.

goal of preparing students for careers as stenographers and clerks remained consistent. The only major change to the program between its creation and desegregation in the late 1950s was the expansion of the Commercial Department's curriculum from a two to three-year course. All available data indicates that graduates from Central's Commercial Department found employment in related fields upon graduation and that their supply of graduates could not meet local demand.<sup>185</sup>

However, while Central's curriculum was on par with the national standard it was not on par with the Commercial Departments in Louisville's white high schools. For comparison, white female and male students had commercial curriculum available far earlier than for African-American students. In 1887, Commercial High School opened for white students to focus on commercial curriculum. This school later merged with Louisville Girls High School (and the boys went to Male) at the behest of the new Board of Education in 1912. Both Girls and Male High Schools provided commercial curriculum not long after their doors opened. The coursework at Girls High School did not differ significantly from Central's other than having superior equipment and classroom space that allowed them to better mimic a real office environment.<sup>186</sup> However, Central's offerings were night and day from Male High School's Commercial Department. Male Principal J.B. Carpenter described Male's four-year program to the Board of Education in the annual report of 1917-1918:

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<sup>185</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1918-1922; Tilford, 20-37.

<sup>186</sup>Margaret Margaret Bell, "Commercial High School," Jefferson County Public School Archives Wiki, [http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/50753/Commercial\\_High\\_School.html](http://media.jefferson.k12.ky.us/groups/jcpshistory/wiki/50753/Commercial_High_School.html); Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1915-1920.

The pupil who completes it in a satisfactory manner is in a position to handle difficult stenographic work with speed and accuracy and to develop shortly into an expert bookkeeper. Besides he is prepared for an independent business of his own through having been grounded in the basic principles that underlie trade and barter, and in the history of the great economic movements in his country. Also such fundamental things as Salesmanship and Advertising are stressed heavily so that altogether the Four-year Commercial Course stands ready to furnish the business interests of Louisville thoroughly trained and properly equipped young men.<sup>187</sup>

There is no comparison between the quality of commercial curriculum at Male and Central Colored High School. It could be said that Male's curriculum prepared future managers and entrepreneurs whilst Central's prepared secretaries and bookkeepers. Given that Girls High School's course outcomes closely matched Central's, there is an element of gender discrimination at play as well. The lack of commercial training in what many would consider a masculine sphere contributed to low male enrollment in Central's commercial track. While male students enrolled in Central's department throughout its history, at most they represented around ten percent of the students in the program. The number of male students declined

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<sup>187</sup> "Seventh Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1917, to June 30, 1918."

significantly in the post-World War II era, likely due to the increasing association between clerical work and female employees.<sup>188</sup>

While Louisville's Board of Education eagerly encouraged an increase in manual training and supported commercial courses, there were limits to their investment in these programs at Central Colored High School. School officials only purchased used equipment for the manual training and commercial departments at Central Colored High School. It would not be until the furnishing of a new facility for Central High School in 1952 that the school received brand new machinery for its industrial arts department (the name changed from manual training to industrial arts in 1936) and housed within the actual school instead of an off-campus annex. These changes allowed for the creation of courses in electricity, plumbing, and machine shop. The portable housing the Commercial Department was housed was heated by a coal stove and was not effective at keeping the building warm in the winter. It was only in 1936 when the board gave Central High School an annex in a former administrative building that the Commercial Department could expand. In this annex, they occupied the second floor and were able to house thirty-five typewriters. Just as the industrial arts program received new equipment when Central transitioned into its new building in 1952, the Commercial Department expanded to include two typewriting rooms, two bookkeeping rooms, a business machines room, a mimeograph room, and a storeroom. While some of the equipment came from the annex classrooms, the board invested in a great deal of new equipment to furnish the expanded Commercial Department. This investment reportedly allowed for a dramatic

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<sup>188</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1915-1920; Tilford, 20-37.

improvement of their Office Practice course, since the improved facilities better mimicked an actual office environment. These eventual upgrades to the facilities and equipment for the manual training and commercial departments at Central Colored High School came about during an effort by the school district to protect themselves from a lawsuit from the NAACP. Without that incentive, it is doubtful the board would have devoted so much money to the city's only non-white high school.<sup>189</sup>

## **Conclusion**

While the Board of Education never articulated a goal of deterring African-American students from pursuing a traditional academic education to prepare for higher education, it was the outcome of most of the board's initiatives. After the new Board of Education threw its weight behind vocational courses for Central's students (be they manual training or commercial), the percentage of students enrolled in those courses would generally increase until desegregation in 1956. By 1941, about twenty-three percent of the school's male students enrolled in the industrial arts track. By 1955, that number increased to over fifty-six percent of male students opting for the industrial arts course of study. The Commercial Department produced similar results. From its creation in 1918, the Commercial Department experienced steady growth from a graduating class of 49 in 1920 (its first since the program launched in 1918) to over two hundred students per graduating class in the years just prior to desegregation. Overall, from 1920 to 1954, eleven percent of Central's total graduates came from the

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<sup>189</sup> "This is Central High School: Louisville's Newest High School," Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY; Tilford, 20-37; Curry, 22-62.



Commercial Department. In essence, the Board of Education made a choice when they took power in 1911 to dramatically shift Central Colored High School's emphasis from preparing students to attend college to preparing them (on some level) for entry into the workforce. The long-term effect of this shift was the decline in the percentage of Central students aspiring to college in their course work and this had a tangible impact on the percentage of students continuing their educations after high school. Correspondingly, in 1955 only twenty-seven percent of Central's graduates would be college bound as opposed to sixty-two per cent in 1918.<sup>190</sup>

By the end of the 1910s, Louisville's Board of Education successfully established their agenda in the city's public schools, both black and white. Moving forward, the board focused primarily on keeping up their standards and managing student population growth. However, major changes were on the horizon as the city weathered the Great Depression and, later, increased calls for true educational equality for Louisville's African-American schools, especially in regard to faculty salaries and school facilities.

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<sup>190</sup> "Eighth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1918, to June 30, 1919; Tilford, 20-37; Curry, 22-62.

## **Chapter 6**

### **THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY, 1930-1954**

#### **Introduction**

When compared with the earlier decades of the twentieth century, the 1930s and 1940s were a period of relative stasis for Louisville's public schools. There was no dramatic board restructuring. Louisville's Board of Education continued to function in the manner previously described, with board members serving long terms and functioning above the influence of most in the community. There was no dramatic increase in the city's student population nor a need for massive construction of new school facilities. There was no radical change in the curriculum offered to students. The increased vocational offerings implemented by the Board of Education in their first decade in power remained the status quo. The primary hurdle faced by Louisville's school system was how to weather the uncertainty brought on by the Great Depression and a catastrophic flooding of the city in 1937.

While the Board of Education and the city of Louisville impressively weathered these challenges, a decision to rework educators' salary schedules in 1935 during the Great Depression set the stage for a major conflict between the Board and Louisville's African-American community. What the city's black teachers and principals did not know in 1935 was that their salary schedule was no longer equal to that of their white peers with similar education and experience. This inequity persisted even after the depression lifted. Cognizance of this fact launched a vigorous campaign to restore equality between white and black educators' salaries in Louisville.

Fortunately, for these African-American educators, the New Deal years sparked a resurgence in political relevance for blacks in the city. While they held nothing close to a majority, recent defections of blacks from the Republican Party meant local politicians could not afford to lose favor with their African-American constituents. Further aiding the Louisville educators fight for salary equality was the national campaign by the NAACP to achieve salary parity for black teachers throughout the South.

After a resounding victory over salaries in 1941, a new fight began over the perennially poor conditions at Central Colored High School. With the rise of African-American political influence and the successful efforts by the NAACP to force desegregation at the graduate and undergraduate levels in states throughout the South, the Board of Education recognized that they would soon need to answer the calls for a new Central campus, calls that dated back to 1935. After a survey of Louisville public schools in 1943 identified a new Central school plant as the top building project needed in the city and multiple fires at the school threatened student safety, the Board of Education finally took preliminary steps in 1945. However, it required a great deal of agitation from the African-American community to pressure the Board to finally fulfill this old obligation in the fall of 1952.

Taken together, the events of the 1930s and 1940s all moved the needle closer to equality between white and black education in Louisville, Kentucky. The credit for this progress laid squarely in the hands of the city's black community. However, true equality remained elusive as the clock ran out on segregated education throughout the country.

## **The Great Depression's Impact on Louisville and Its Public Schools**

Throughout the United States, the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 caused a deluge of school closings, teacher layoffs, and program cuts. However, due to Louisville's wide variety of industries and a number of recession proof manufacturing enterprises, the city's economy did not suffer at the level experienced elsewhere in the country. Still, the Board of Education needed to tighten the belt to survive the lean years, which they did by eliminating non-primary and high school educational offerings (e.g. night schools) and instituting a hiring freeze. Ultimately, it was not an economic catastrophe but a natural disaster that forced Louisville's schools to close temporarily during the Great Depression. Despite the inclement weather and economic climate, the Board initiated substantive improvements to some of Louisville's African-American schools, the majority of them at Central Colored High School. However, after decades of continued discrimination against black schools and educators at the hands of the Board, these improvements failed to satiate the black community's desire for positive change.

While the Great Depression did not entirely spare Louisville from its effects, the city certainly suffered far less than the majority of urban centers. While the year of 1932 found the city at the brink of economic disaster, its diversity of industries and manufacturers was a key reason Louisville's economic output and unemployment numbers rebounded and never again approached the national averages. Louisville was one of the only cities that housed factories representing all twenty of the industrial groups identified in the nation's census. This variety softened the economic blow of the financial downturn as some industries saw less of an impact than others did. For example, the Kentucky Macaroni Company, a producer of low cost food products,

maintained normal production as demand for their product continued due to tight Depression-era family budgets. Similarly, the Enro Shirt Company never needed to reduce production of their low cost clothing. Many of these industries actually extended their operations in Louisville during the Great Depression. In 1933 alone, the city added twenty-five new manufacturing enterprises and saw forty-five existing plants expand their facilities.<sup>191</sup>

Further girding the city's economy from the depths of the Depression were two of the city's signature industries: tobacco and alcohol. The tobacco industry grew exponentially during the Depression. Louisville's tobacco producers manufactured eleven billion cigarettes in 1932, which was three times as many as they had produced in 1931. At an average of ten cents a pack, cigarettes assuaged the nerves of Americans in those uncertain times. All of the city's tobacco companies remained at maximum production throughout the Depression and constructed additional facilities to keep up with demand. At the end of 1933, with the repeal of Prohibition, Louisville's distilleries, most famous for bourbon, quickly moved to reopen and launch production. Many new distilleries also opened, including a Seagram and Sons distillery, the largest in the world at that time, in downtown Louisville in 1937. Every new or reopened distillery meant thousands of new jobs in the city; for instance, the Brown-Forman Distiller hired over a thousand women to operate just one of their bottling lines. The combined growth of the tobacco and alcohol producers in

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<sup>191</sup> George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio: A History of Louisville and Jefferson County* (Louisville: The Heritage Corporation, 1979) 192-205; Thelma Cayne Tilford, "A Survey of Business Education at Central High School from 1918 to 1954" (master's thesis, University of Louisville, 1954), 14-15.

Louisville, beginning in 1933, led to a steady increase in employment throughout the rest of the decade.<sup>192</sup>

Louisville's variety of depression-proof industries kept the city from plunging into extreme economic despair and led to a rebounding economy beginning in 1933. However, during the 1931-1932 school year the Board of Education of Louisville found themselves in dire financial straits resulting from lower tax revenues. In January 1932, Board members implemented a ten percent reduction of salaries for all school employees other than principals and teachers. In April, the Board took further action and announced that all schools would end a month earlier than scheduled. In a surprise move, the city's teachers volunteered to work for two weeks without pay, an offer the Board accepted and cut the proposed closure time in half. To the surprise of the school system, the city's tax receipts for 1932 were higher than anticipated, leaving the Board with a surplus as they neared the end of their financial year. As such, all teachers received back pay for the two weeks they voluntarily worked at the end of the year. Non-teaching staff also saw their ten percent salary reduction lifted.<sup>193</sup>

Despite this minor windfall, the Board continued to take steps to reduce expenditures as the Great Depression continued. First on the chopping block were programs outside of their normal primary and high school offerings. All night school programs closed immediately and there were no arrangements made for summer schools in 1932. Second, in an effort to decrease the need for additional school

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<sup>192</sup> Yater, 192-205.

<sup>193</sup> "Twenty-first Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1931, to June 30, 1932," Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY.

facilities going forward, the Board increased class sizes at all grade levels. They also closed two elementary schools and distributed the students and teachers to other facilities. Third, the Board took the practical step of reconditioning older equipment and appliances to reduce purchasing orders. These cuts compare favorably with those taken by most school systems during the Great Depression. California's schools, though among the least impacted in the country, had to make far greater adjustments, including reducing music instruction, kindergartens services, pupil transportation, and student counseling.<sup>194</sup>

The Board of Education also took a number of steps regarding the teaching staff. They instituted a hiring freeze. When teaching positions became vacant, students shifted to other teachers (this relates to the Board's decision to increase class sizes). They also reduced their visiting faculty from twenty-four to sixteen. By the end of the 1932 school year, there were one hundred and twenty-six fewer teachers, most of which were night school or visiting teachers. Of those let go, African-Americans constituted less than fifteen percent, making their losses proportionate with the total teacher population. These job losses were unfortunate, but the Board enacted them with a mind to making sure they did not have to lay off any fulltime teachers. Fortunately, some of these former teachers found work when the Kentucky Department of Education created a program of emergency education for adults in

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<sup>194</sup> "Twenty-first Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1931, to June 30, 1932;" Irving G. Hendrick, "The Impact of the Great Depression on Public School Support in California," *Southern California Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 177-195.

1933. The New Deal's Works Progress Administration later took over and expanded these course offerings.<sup>195</sup>

Because of Louisville's steady economic recovery beginning in 1933 and the Board of Education's responsive fiscal policies, no extreme cuts or school closures occurred. However, this was not the case for most American school districts. Leadership in Fort Wayne, Indiana, a city similar to Louisville in its diverse industrial sector and location as a major trade port, made significant cuts to education to pay for their growing relief efforts without raising taxes. To accomplish this they reduced teacher pay by twenty-five percent and fired ten percent of their teachers. Another river city, Memphis, Tennessee, managed to retain all of their teachers, but reduced their salaries by seventeen percent. Even then, the teachers often went without pay for months at a time and eventually the city paid them in scrip. Farther down the Mississippi River, New Orleans' educators received significant pay cuts ranging from fourteen percent to a thirty-one percent cut for the superintendent. The state of Arkansas, due in large part to a legislature who bickered more than they solved problems, experienced some of the worst hits to education in the country. Teachers went months without pay when schools managed to stay open, while in many areas schools remained closed for so long that children fell two years behind in their educations. Clearly, Louisville's schools survived the Great Depression relatively unscathed.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> "Twenty-first Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1931, to June 30, 1932;" "Twenty-third Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1933, to June 30, 1934."

<sup>196</sup> Iwan Morgan, "Fort Wayne and the Great Depression: The Early Years, 1929-1933," *Indiana Magazine of History* 80, no. 2 (June 1984): 122-145; Roger Biles,



In contrast to the financially driven school closings elsewhere in the nation, it took a flood of biblical proportions to close Louisville's schools. On January 6, 1937, it began to rain and half a year's precipitation came down over the next 14 days. The Great Flood of 1937 peaked on January 27 as the river gauge reached fifty-seven feet, surpassing the record set by the flood of 1884. Over sixty percent of the city was submerged, ninety people lost their lives, and two-thirds of the city's residents evacuated. Just days before the river crested, the school board asked that all janitors and engineers in the school district report to their respective buildings to try to protect the buildings and supplies. While twenty school buildings received too much damage to be of use, the other sixty or so facilities became refugee centers, as well as makeshift hospitals, police stations, and Red Cross headquarters. Over three-hundred faculty members worked at the schools providing relief to the displaced. Virtually all of the black schools were in flooded areas, so those faculty and facilities were on the frontlines of the crisis. In several black schools, they even had to move everyone to the upper floors as the floodwaters rose.<sup>197</sup>

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"The Persistence of the Past: Memphis in the Great Depression," *The Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 2 (May 1986): 183-212; Gail S. Murray, "Forty Years Ago: The Great Depression Comes to Arkansas," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1970): 291-312; Roman Heleniak, "Local Reaction to the Great Depression in New Orleans, 1929-1933," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1969):289-306; David Tyack, Robert Lowe, and Elisabeth Hansot, *Public Schools in Hard Times: The Great Depression and Recent Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>197</sup> Yater, 199-202; "Twenty-sixth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1936, to June 30, 1937;" "The Great 1937 Flood of Louisville and Southern Indiana," The Filson Historical Society, <http://filsonhistorical.org/galleries/the-great-1937-flood-of-louisville-southern-indiana/>.

By mid-February 1937, the river had returned to normal levels, leaving the school district with over \$300,000 in damages. Without the efforts of the janitors and engineers tasked with protecting the buildings, this total could have been far higher. As the schools had served refugees for weeks while power and water were mostly offline, the facilities were in a very primitive condition. The Board wisely chose to keep all schools closed until they received thorough cleanings and a passing inspection from the city's health officials. Other practical issues like communicating with staff and faculty (many of whom had left town during the evacuations), securing supplies and equipment, and navigating how to handle the high number of displaced students further delayed school reopening. On February 22, forty-five of seventy-eight school reopened, and all but nine schools reopened by mid-March. Of the schools too damaged to relaunch that semester, four of them were white elementary schools while the other five were black schools. The Board sent as many of these students as they could to other schools. Some schools began to hold two separate sessions a day, including Saturdays. To accommodate the remaining students, some classes met in churches or private homes until they restored all of the schools.<sup>198</sup>

Such a major catastrophe could have derailed the mild boom taking place in Louisville's economy or had a long-term impact on the schools, but the city made a rapid recovery. With aid from the Federal Disaster Loan Corporation and the Works Progress Administration, workers set about repairing or rebuilding homes, cleaning the streets, and scraping mud from buildings. The sudden surge in employment opportunities actually helped the city fully recover from the Great Depression. By the

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<sup>198</sup> “Twenty-sixth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1936, to June 30, 1937.”

time the city celebrated the Kentucky Derby on the first Saturday of May in 1937, many observed that there remained few traces of the flood.<sup>199</sup>

Devastating as the Great Flood of 1937 was for Louisville's African-American community, it was not this natural disaster but, rather, grievances with the Board of Education that would persist for years after the floodwaters receded. While the school board would spend some money to improve a few black schools, they would fall far short of the African-American community's expectations. Central Colored High School added a course in building construction beginning in the 1933-1934 school year. This course gave students practical experience with techniques in framing, foundations, and other key aspects of the construction profession. The Board initiated this improvement at the behest of Atwood Wilson, the principal at Madison Street Junior High. Wilson's master's thesis from the University of Chicago studied vocational education in Louisville's black schools and recommended a number of curriculum changes, including preparing students for careers that were on the rise in the Louisville community. This new course enabled graduates to move into Louisville's rapidly growing construction field. Other improvement efforts by the board included the purchase of additional property for Jackson Junior High School and Wheatley Elementary School. They also set up portables at Talbert elementary to help with overcrowding. These portables came from a white school that no longer needed them because construction was complete on their new school facility.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Yater, 199-201.

<sup>200</sup> Atwood Sylvester Wilson, "The Vocational Opportunity and Education of Colored Pupils at Louisville" (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1934), 95-107; "Twenty-second Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1932,

By far the greatest improvement to black school facilities during the Great Depression was the addition of a Practical Arts annex and other major renovations at Central Colored High School in 1935. Keeping with the Board's longstanding tradition of giving black schools buildings no longer used by white schools or board administration, in 1930 the Board determined they needed a new office facility and decided to give their current building to Central Colored High School. While this was a practical solution to Central's need for more space and the building was on the same block as Central, the facility was over a hundred years old. To the Board's credit, they did spend \$90,000 during America's greatest economic crisis to improve Central's campus. The school board's former offices would now house Central's principal and a Practical Arts annex. This included shops for a wide variety of trades: bookkeeping, building construction, mechanical drawing, molding, pressing, tailoring, typing, and woodwork. Elsewhere at Central, the facilities received other upgrades. The board commissioned a new gymnasium for female students, the former gym became a large library, and they added a music room and medical suite. Lastly, the campus received enlarged and upgraded chemistry and home economics facilities.<sup>201</sup>

It came as a surprise to the Board of Education that the completion and dedication of Central's Practical Arts annex launched a deluge of vocal dissatisfaction with the condition of African-American education in Louisville. While the Board

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to June 30, 1933;" "Twenty-third Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1933, to June 30, 1934."

<sup>201</sup> "Twentieth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1930, to June 30, 1931;" "Twenty-fifth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1935, to June 30, 1936;" *Louisville Defender*, December 21, 1935.

thought the black community would be pleased with the improvements at Central, they met with criticism. The keynote speaker at the Practical Arts annex's dedication, Reverend J. A. Johnson, made it clear that Louisville's African-American community would not be assuaged until Central Colored High School received a brand new facility. Reverend Johnson even went so far as to address directly the Board of Education members in attendance, saying, "After this, what?"<sup>202</sup>

While the upgrades to Central's campus enhanced the schools' education offerings, they were not enough to satisfy the black community after decades of their schools receiving hand-me-down facilities no longer considered fit for white students, increasingly unequal educational opportunities, and countless abuses against black faculty and administrators. Over the next few months, the *Louisville Defender* newspaper and numerous black community organizations began to push for a variety of improvements in African-American education. In addition to a new facility for Central Colored High School, there was a call for new, modern facilities for all black schools. Those calling for improvements regularly pointed to the monies spent on stadiums for white schools and the palatial school buildings the Board approved. The second most common request sought vocational training in black schools equivalent to what the Board made available in white schools. As previously discussed, the Board restructuring in 1910 resulted in the beginning of the divergence in offerings for African-American students, and those discrepancies continued for decades. Lastly, the local black community wanted justice for their teachers. Since the early days of public education for African-Americans in Louisville, black faculty were regularly held to

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<sup>202</sup> *Louisville Defender*, December 21, 1935; *Louisville Leader*, December 21, 1935.

higher moral standards than were their white counterparts. While the practice of holding public meetings where the character of black faculty was up for discussion had been eliminated, it remained common for the Board to ask a faculty member to resign if there were rumors of behavioral impropriety in or outside of school. Black community organizers simply requested that African-American faculty asked to resign receive an opportunity to appear before the Board to prove their innocence. In a related request, they often asked that merit alone serve as the determining factor for faculty hires, with no regard given to political party affiliation. Most offensive to Louisville's African-American community was the return to unequal pay for black teachers in the standard salary schedule beginning in 1935. This pay inequity proved to be the cause that would rally the black community for years to come.<sup>203</sup>

When reflecting on the Great Depression and its impact on African-American schools in Louisville, it is important to see how the white members of the city's Board of Education justified to themselves their decision to turn a deaf ear to the black community's complaints. Other than the months following the Great Flood of 1937, no school closures took place in Louisville. While the Louisville Board most certainly spent more money on white students than black students, it was nothing compared to Atlanta's dramatic average pupil expenditure discrepancy, where white students received \$95.20 compared to \$30.55 for black students. As the black community called for new facilities for Central Colored High School, the Louisville Board could point to the \$90,000 it had just spent to outfit a Practical Arts Annex and compare that

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<sup>203</sup> *Louisville Defender*, multiple issues, December 1935 to November 1936; George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 50-76.

to the lack of high schools for blacks in most of rural Kentucky. Regardless of how benevolent the Board of Education saw itself for the opportunities they provided in their African-American schools, which were undeniably superior to those available to most black students throughout the country, their choice to place African-American teachers on a reduced salary schedule in 1935 would lead to the local black community's first true resistance effort against the board, an effort that would soon result in a significant victory for Louisville's African-American community.<sup>204</sup>

### **The Fight for Salary Equalization**

While it was not at first obvious to African-American educators, in 1935 the Board of Education placed them on a reduced salary schedule because of their race. As the facts in this matter emerged, these teachers chose to fight for their equality. Unlike other salary equity cases in the South where the NAACP took the lead, Louisville teachers took the initiative to take on the school board and kept control of the proceedings, often to the chagrin of Thurgood Marshall. This local movement scored a major civil rights success by exposing the facts of their discrimination, galvanizing support from key allies in the city, and resorting to litigation only when they needed to force the Board of Education's hand. Through this strategy, African-American teachers achieved salary equity, setting the stage for future battles over the quality of black schools with the Board of Education.

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<sup>204</sup> Roger Biles, "The Urban South and the Great Depression," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 71-100.

At the inception of public schools for African-Americans in Louisville, there was a separate salary schedule for white and black educators. The greatest disparities in pay were at the level of principal, where it was not uncommon for a white principal to make over twice as much as a black principal in the first decade of African-American public schools. Throughout the history of Louisville's public schools, the least amount of pay discrimination took place among lower-level elementary school teachers. For example, in 1876, entry-level white teachers made \$400 annual salary versus \$350 for African-American educators at the same pay grade. The gaps between principal and teacher salaries did decrease over the years. By 1918, the elementary teacher pay gap was down from fifty to one-hundred dollars to around forty-five dollars for black and white teachers with the same experience. Concurrently, the gap between white and black principals, while greatly reduced, remained substantial at around \$350.<sup>205</sup>

For as long as this discriminatory pay structure existed, there were ongoing efforts to equalize and improve salaries for African-American educators in Louisville. As early as 1874, the Board of Visitors requested a pay increase for African-American teachers, which only resulted in a slight increase for black principals (who at that time also had teaching duties). This was a rare victory, since most efforts to improve salary equity over the decades went ignored. The records indicate that the board would hear requests for improved pay or new salary schedules for black teachers with some frequency, but they then deferred to a committee or other entity where no action

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<sup>205</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Reports, 1871-1910, Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1910-1925.



occurred. Never in any of the historical records does the Board give any justification for this discriminatory status quo. The board also never explains why the wage gap decreased slightly and slowly over time.<sup>206</sup>

Despite the blatant racism of the pay gap, African-American educators found it difficult to justify an increase in pay to the white school board. This was primarily because black teachers in Louisville made dramatically more money than their counterparts throughout the South, especially in Kentucky. In 1879, the average African-American teacher's annual salary in the state was a mere fifty dollars versus the three-hundred and fifty to five-hundred dollars earned by Louisville's black teachers. That Louisville's black educators made at least seven times more than their counterparts in the state made it difficult for whites to take Louisville teachers' salary complaints seriously. However, despite the lack of traction African-Americans got with the Board of Education on this issue, during the 1925-1926 school year, the Board of Education adopted a single salary schedule. The purpose of this new schedule was to eliminate pay discrimination between male and female teachers, as well as pay differences between high school and elementary school teachers. As put by Superintendent Byron Hartley in the 1925-1926 annual report, "All salaries and promotions are based entirely upon training, length of service, and efficiency." There was no mention or discussion of the new salary schedule eliminating pay discrimination based on race, but never again would the Board maintain two separate salary schedules labeled for white and black faculty. Despite the Superintendent's claims of equity, the new schedule was rife with room for abuse. A clause in the

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

schedule said head of departments in high schools “may” receive an additional two-hundred dollars a year. There was also a special class with a higher pay grade for “teachers whose superior teaching, advanced study, and higher professional equipment justify higher compensation.” Given these provisions, there was room for interpretation as to what class a teacher might belong, so there continued to be pay discrepancies in the following years. Keeping with historical precedent, the largest gaps were among high school principals and faculty, while elementary school teachers usually made about the same regardless of race.<sup>207</sup>

The 1926 schedule proved so problematic the Board revised it in 1929 before unofficially abandoning it in 1930. In 1933, the Board of Education commissioned a study of the salary schedule. As Louisville was already recovering from the Great Depression, school leadership needed to improve a failed schedule, not simply reduce costs. The city formed a committee of 150 teachers, broken down into smaller committees of 30, and then a final committee of six. These committees worked with the Board’s chairman of the finance committee and director of research to develop a new pay schedule. Through this process, they developed a questionnaire on the basic principles that should guide the new schedule. Then sent this questionnaire to the city’s teachers and designed the new pay schedule based on the principles most popular among the faculty. A draft of this new schedule went through the various faculty committees before they sent it to all the city’s teachers, who could make suggestions or indicate that they had no suggestions to contribute. The Board of

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<sup>207</sup> Louisville School Board, Annual Reports, 1871-1910; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Annual Reports, 1910-1935.

Education made some final revisions before they adopted the new schedule on July 2, 1935, putting it into effect in September 1935.<sup>208</sup>

There is no indication that any African-American faculty were included on these committees. The Board regularly excluded black educators from such committees. For instance, in 1935 there was a faculty committee selected to conduct a curriculum study with the three assistant superintendents. Twelve teachers served on an elementary school committee and another twelve for the high school portion; none of them were African-American. Despite this discrimination, there is evidence that teachers of color did receive the initial questionnaire on principles guiding the new salary schedule and the second asking for suggestions on the draft. There was no reason for the city's African-American teachers to suspect that in the final modifications of the schedule, the Board of Education would add a clause leading to a significant pay differential based on race.<sup>209</sup>

The new salary schedule adopted by the board in 1935 went in a very different direction than the 1926 schedule. While there were still no categorical distinctions between elementary, junior high, and high school teachers' salaries, there were a high number of differentials for those in other positions, like deans and supervisors. The principal pay scale also now took the size of schools and their faculty numbers into consideration. Most surprisingly, the 1935 schedule introduced gender discrimination

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<sup>208</sup> "Twenty-fourth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1934, to June 30, 1935."

<sup>209</sup> "Twenty-fourth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1934, to June 30, 1935;" "Twenty-fifth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1935, to June 30, 1936."

in the pay scale, affording an additional two-hundred dollars to male teachers once they had three or more years of experience. The board added the segment of the new schedule that would lead to severe discrimination against African-American educators after they sent drafts out for faculty feedback. This was section six of the schedule, entitled the “Modification of the scale for certain schools” and read as follows:

In any school in which the aggregate 1934-1935 contract salaries of the teachers and the principal would have to be increased in 1935-1936 by from ten percent to twenty percent or more to meet unrestricted salary schedule provisions, the scale of salaries shall be fifteen percent less than the scale provided in this schedule, for the principals and teachers now employed or who may hereafter be employed in that school, provided, however, that the application of the provisions of this clause shall not operate to cause, of itself, the reduction in salary of any teacher or principal now employed in such school.<sup>210</sup>

In other words, when they combined the salaries of all the teachers and principals at a school at the old rate, if they would need a ten to twenty percent raise to meet the new salary schedule, they will not be eligible for the new “unrestricted” schedule. Instead, they received fifteen percent less than what was listed in the new

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<sup>210</sup> “Twenty-fifth Report of the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, from July 1, 1935, to June 30, 1936.”

salary schedule. That clause applied to those currently employed at those schools and to all future hires.

With this clause, the Board of Education returned to a racially differentiated salary schedule without putting it in print. The reduced salary schedule became known as the “restricted” salary schedule, versus the “unrestricted” schedule followed by the white schools. By using such vague language, the Board sought to avoid the appearance of discrimination. This effort was successful in that it took time for this discrimination to become apparent to the city’s black educators who did not realize that the “restricted” schedule only applied to their faculty. The Board of Education’s motivation for returning to a discriminatory pay scale in 1935 remains unknown. However, later discussions indicate it was an effort to reduce operating costs. In this way, the new schedule was very successful. The more education and experience an African-American educator possessed, the more money the board saved since the “restricted” schedule was percentage based. For instance, when white teachers with a master’s degree began teaching they made \$1300 versus the \$1105 earned by their African-American counterparts with a master’s degree entering the system that same year. This was a differential of \$195 between the unrestricted and restricted schedules. By the time both of these teachers had ten years of experience, the annual differential ballooned to \$300 per year. Moreover, throughout their identical decade of service, the board withheld \$2,685 from the African-American teacher.<sup>211</sup>

The record is frustratingly unclear about when Louisville’s African-American educators realized the systematic racism in the salary schedule. The first

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<sup>211</sup> “Section VI of the Salary Schedule,” Lyman T. Johnson Papers, University of Louisville Archives (hereafter cited as Johnson UofL).

documentation in the historical record dates to January 1938. These and other records indicate that they knew there was a differential for a few years, but were unaware of how systemic the discrimination was nor the exact amount of the pay differential. Meanwhile, the Board of Education followed the 1935 salary schedule to the letter. In Board of Education meeting minutes, they documented when they hired a new teacher, along with their education, experience, and salary. For example, on September 7, 1937, they recorded that Mr. Robert J. Bickel, with an associate's degree from the University of Louisville and no prior teaching experience, was hired at a salary of \$110 per month while Miss Alice Kathryn Holden, with an associate's from Fisk University and no prior teaching experience, was hired at a salary of \$93.50. Miss Holden made exactly fifteen percent less than Mr. Bickel, despite their matching education and experience, because of her placement at an African-American school and on the "restricted" schedule. Given the intentionally vague wording of section six of the 1935 salary schedule and the privacy surrounding individual wages, it is not surprising that African-American teachers did not know that their schools were all on the restricted schedule and all white schools on the unrestricted.<sup>212</sup>

While Louisville's African-American faculty were not aware of the specifics of their pay differential, they did know they made more money and that their pay differential was less severe than that of their peers in other urban areas. In Birmingham, Alabama, a white teacher's average salary was \$1,466 while a black

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<sup>212</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky. Meeting Minutes, September 7, 1937. Victor Perry to NAACP Legal, letter, January 1938, Johnson UofL; Mark Tushnet, *The NAACPs Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

teacher's was a mere \$682. By 1938, the practice of paying black teachers less than white teachers with equivalent training and experience was on the decline throughout the state of Kentucky with little variation found in salaries in rural areas. However, teachers in rural Kentucky made dramatically less than educators in Louisville. Independent districts, like Louisville, had the greatest salary differentials between blacks and whites in the state, but African-American faculty still made more money than their rural peers. This was the difficulty faced by African-American teachers in Louisville when they contemplated fighting for better wages: their peers in other urban areas had a greater differential and their rural peers made far less. Should they fight for equal wages, they risked losing their jobs and they would not be able to find a better paying position in the region.<sup>213</sup>

Despite this obstacle, starting in 1938, a group of teachers from the Louisville Association of Teachers in Colored Schools (LATCS) began an active investigation into the salary differential. Prior to this time, the LATCS was not political and functioned more as a professional development organization. The decision to take on salary equalization led to a split in their ranks and new leadership. Lyman T. Johnson became President and Victor K. Perry its Vice President. They were both teachers at Central Colored High School and would be the key players in the movement. As recounted by Johnson, they had been aware that some schools followed the restricted salary schedule while others followed the unrestricted. What they did not know until

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<sup>213</sup> Frank L. McVey, *The Gates Open Slowly: A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1949), 142-143; Leonard Ephraim Meece, "Negro Education in Kentucky: A Comparative Study of White and Negro Education on the Elementary and Secondary School Level," *Bulletin of the Bureau of School Service* X, no. 3 (March 1938); Biles, 71-100.

they started investigating was that the two groups fell cleanly along racial lines. What ultimately tipped them off to the racial dimension of the salary schedule was when they learned that when the Board implemented the new 1935 salary schedule, two white schools ended up on the restricted schedule based on the criteria in section six. However, those two schools soon closed and the teachers transferred to schools on the unrestricted schedule. This confirmed that only African-American schools functioned under the restricted schedule. With further investigation, the LATCS confirmed the differential between the two salary schedules. They accomplished this by speaking with white teachers sympathetic to their cause, who told them their salary along with their education and experience. LATCS would then compare those salaries and qualifications with their African-American counterparts. What they found over and over was that the differential was fifteen percent. With these facts established, the vague language in section six of the salary schedule could no longer veil the racial discrimination it had perpetuated for years.<sup>214</sup>

With the salary inequity confirmed, Johnson and other African-American teachers from the Louisville Association of Teachers in Colored Schools prepared to fight for change. However, not all of the city's African-American teachers were on board. Many of Louisville's black teachers feared losing their jobs if they affiliated with this campaign, and knew they would not find comparable wages elsewhere. The principals were especially hesitant to take on the Board. This led some of them to

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<sup>214</sup> Lyman T. Johnson, interview by Regina Monsour, Louisville, November 10, 1977, Johnson UofL; Edwina Ann Doyle, ed., *From the Fort to the Future: Educating the Children of Kentucky* (Lexington: Kentucky Images, 1987) 254-267; Ada F. Coleman, "Salary Equalization Movement," *The Journal of Negro Education* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1947), 235-241.



contact the school board to tell them that they were not a part of the crusade. Lyman Johnson reported that around sixteen teachers comprised the core contingency against the salary differential, and another sixty supported the movement financially through donations. This committee, working as an offshoot of the LATCS, went by various names, including the Louisville Education Equalization Committee or the Louisville Education Inequalities Committee. Occasionally, there was mention of them as the Joint Committee for the Equalization of Teachers' Salaries.<sup>215</sup>

When word of an organized effort to eliminate salary discrimination reached Superintendent Zenos Scott, Lyman Johnson recalled that Scott confronted him in person. The superintendent asked if Johnson knew the percentage of white pay that black teachers received in Birmingham or Atlanta. Johnson was well aware that black teachers in those schools received respectively 56 and 64 percent of what white teachers in their cities received. Superintendent Scott followed that his African-American educators' receipt of 85 percent of what white teachers received was evidence that the board was good to its black teachers. To this, Johnson replied that he did not live in those cities and that all they asked for was equal treatment before the law. This conversation points to the usual rhetoric blacks faced in Louisville when they challenged the racist status quo. African-Americans in Louisville had it better than their counterparts in most of the South, so they should stop agitating for more rights. Unfortunately for Superintendent Scott and the status quo, African-Americans

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<sup>215</sup> Lyman T. Johnson, interview by Regina Monsour, Louisville, November 10, 1977, Johnson UofL; Doyle, 254-267.

in Louisville were no longer content with their second-class status in education or elsewhere.<sup>216</sup>

Beginning in 1921, Louisville's African-Americans fought to restore the political influence they enjoyed before the Board of Alderman and Board of Education elections shifted from ward-based to city-wide elections in 1893 and 1910, respectively. For years, the city's local Republican Party took their African-American members for granted, despite their inability to win local elections without their support. In part galvanized by the local black community's successful defeat of the University of Louisville bond issue and the Republican Party's refusal to back Wilson Lovett for the Board of Education election in 1920, in 1921 a small group of Louisville's African-Americans formed the Lincoln Independent Political Party. They ran a slate of twenty-one local black men and women in every office in the 1921 elections. While this new party did not secure any elected positions, they did reassert the importance of Louisville's African-American vote to the Republican Party, who lost a number of positions to Democrats. After decades of Republicans neglecting to give African-Americans positions in city hall, the party finally sought to earn the loyalty of its black constituents by hiring African-Americans for clerical positions in city government, hiring black firefighters and police officers, and supporting the creation of Louisville Municipal College (meant to be the separate but equal counterpart to the University of Louisville).<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Doyle, 255-266.

<sup>217</sup> Alice Allison Dunnigan, *The Fascinating Story of Black Kentuckians: Their Heritage and Traditions* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1982), 347-398; George C. Wright, "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The

Moving into the 1930s, a new generation of black political leadership came to the fore in Louisville. Among them were Frank Stanley, Sr., founder and editor of the *Louisville Defender*, C. Eubank Tucker, a minister and attorney, and Charles Anderson, an attorney and president of the local NAACP branch. As happened in many black communities, President Roosevelt's New Deal led some African-Americans began to shift their alliances to the Democratic Party. In Louisville, the Democrats announced that Eubank Tucker was their candidate for the Kentucky State legislature in 1935. Tucker's defection to their party a few years earlier helped the Democrats take the mayor's office in 1933. In response, the Republicans ran Charles Anderson as their candidate. This marked the first time either party sponsored African-American candidates in Louisville. Between Anderson's position as the head of the NAACP and Republicans comprising the majority of the district, Anderson scored a substantial victory over Tucker. This made Charles Anderson Kentucky's first African-American legislator and the first in the South since the end of Reconstruction. Anderson proved instrumental in creating legislation to benefit his fellow black Kentuckians during his ten years in office. This including a bill that allowed married women to remain in their positions as teachers, a measure that outlawed public hangings in Kentucky, and a law that paid African-American students for their expenses attending out of town high schools if their county did not

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Lincoln Independent Party of 1921" *The Journal of Negro History* 68, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 8-23.

provide one. He left his seat in the state house when he became Louisville's assistant commonwealth attorney.<sup>218</sup>

Along with Anderson, Tucker and others fought for increased equality for African-American, a key player in Louisville's African-American political resurgence was Lyman T. Johnson. Having moved to Louisville to teach at Central Colored High School in 1933, Johnson became a key civil rights leader in Louisville and the state of Kentucky. Like Albert E. Meyzeek before him, Johnson would utilize his role as a leader in education to fight for rights both in and out of the classroom. Most notably, Johnson was the plaintiff in *Johnson v. University of Kentucky*, where he successfully sued to allow African-Americans to enroll in graduate programs at the state's flagship university in 1949. The fight for salary equalization was Johnson's first significant civil rights victory, a victory he would achieve through collaboration with his fellow teachers and a network of local and national organizations.

In January 1939, Lyman T. Johnson, in his capacity as the president of the Louisville Association of Teachers in Colored Schools, received correspondence from the Louisville Urban League. The League, chaired by Albert E. Meyzeek, invited the LATCS to collaborate with the Urban League and the Louisville branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to fight salary discrimination. The Urban League leadership believed that teacher involvement was

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<sup>218</sup> George C. Wright, "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The Lincoln Independent Party of 1921" *The Journal of Negro History* 68, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 8-23.; Yater, 197-198; Dunnigan, 347-398; John E. Kleber, ed., "Charles Anderson" in *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 34-35.

essential, but they understood that teachers would put themselves at risk by participating. The League, in particular, wanted guidance and cooperation from Johnson. With all parties agreed, Johnson's teacher committee met with representatives from the Urban League and the NAACP on February 2 to prepare for a meeting with the Board of Education on February 3, 1939. At this point members of the Board had confirmed with the Urban League that any participating teachers need not fear retaliation.<sup>219</sup>

While there are no minutes from the meeting from February 3, a copy of the letter presented to the Board from the NAACP and Urban League at the meeting reveals its purpose:

We understand that the only schools in Louisville classified in the 85% group are schools attended by colored children and employing colored teachers. Our only conclusion, therefore, is that the salary schedule, while it does not definitely indicate a differential for white and colored teachers, is so drawn that Negro teachers automatically fall in the 85% group and are paid a salary 15% less than the teachers employed in the 100% group. Our interpretation of this provision of the schedule has been recently verified in conferences with the superintendent of schools.

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<sup>219</sup> Urban League of Louisville to Lyman Johnson, letter, January 17, 1939, Johnson UofL; Urban League to Lyman Johnson and LATCS, letter, January 31, 1939, Johnson UofL.

Without attempting to argue the merits of this salary schedule, it is our opinion that any schedule which discriminates in the payment of people doing the same type and amount of work and meeting the same requirements for employment, is unsatisfactory and should be revised.

We therefore request your immediate consideration of this particular provision of the salary schedule and urge you to make such changes as will enable colored teachers to obtain the full salary provisions of the schedule. We are joined in this request by a majority of the colored teachers in the Public Schools, as is attested by the attached petition expressing their desire for a reconsideration of this schedule.<sup>220</sup>

No copy of the petition survives, so we may never know how many of Louisville's African-American educators stood behind these efforts. What we do know is that the Board of Education of Louisville took action on the NAACP and Urban League's request. At a meeting of the Board on April 20, 1939, they adopted a resolution wherein they recognized salary inequality and agreed to eliminate it. They adopted a plan where they eliminated the differential over a period of five years, set to begin when financial considerations were favorable. The ostensible reason for the incremental equalization was to spread out the increased tax burden. The Board of

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<sup>220</sup> NAACP and Urban League to the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, letter, February 3, 1939, Johnson UofL.

Education sent a letter to Lyman Johnson and other key figures in the salary crusade informing them of their plans.<sup>221</sup>

Meanwhile, the Louisville campaign worked to expand their efforts. On April 15, 1939, the Urban League presented a proposal to the Kentucky Negro Education Association (KNEA) at their annual meeting. The Urban League asked that they consider three proposals. First, that the organization donate \$500 toward the fight for equal salaries for Kentucky's African-American teachers. Second, that they form a special committee to work toward the elimination of all inequities in education in Kentucky. Lastly, that they begin a fundraising effort to set aside an additional \$5,000 for the fight for education equality throughout the state. The KNEA voted and adopted all three of the Urban League's suggestions. They set aside the funds and created a six-person committee, the Education Inequalities Committee. This committee had representatives from throughout the state, including the principal of Central Colored High School, Atwood S. Wilson. They determined that the KNEA and this new committee should focus first on the battle for salary equalization in Louisville before expanding into other areas of the state of Kentucky. The KNEA also stated their intention to raise the \$5,000.<sup>222</sup>

It is in correspondence between Johnson and S.L. Barker, KNEA's president that we learn of Johnson's reaction to the Board of Education's letter regarding the elimination of the salary differential. He tells Barker that they will need the \$500

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<sup>221</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky to Mayor Joseph D. Scholtz, letter, date unknown, Johnson UofL.

<sup>222</sup> Urban League to Kentucky Negro Educational Association, letter, April, 15, 1939, Johnson UofL. "Statement on Abbington Case," Johnson UofL.

commitment from KNEA as soon as possible. While the Board of Education informed him that they would eliminate the differential “if and when the conditions justify,” he and the other teachers felt this was too vague a commitment and believed that filing a suit was the next step. At a meeting on April 25, Johnson and his fellow LATCS participants crafted an official response to the Board’s April 20 decision. In a statement that they sent to the Board of Education and the local press, the teachers appreciated that the Board openly stated that a differential along racial lines existed and that they intended to remove it. However, the LACTS also expressed disappointment the Board did not plan to remove the differential for the upcoming 1939-1940 school year. Since the Board typically distributed teacher contracts in April, they felt the Board could take immediate action to rectify the discrimination in their salaries. The LATCS clearly articulated that the Board’s decision on April 20 did not represent a solution to the problem, nor the end of their campaign for salary equality.<sup>223</sup>

It was in the summer of 1939 that the national office of the NAACP became involved in Louisville’s fight for salary equality. In January 1938, Victor Perry wrote a letter to the NAACP asking for advice on fighting the Board of Education. It took a year and a half to receive a response. When they did hear from Thurgood Marshall in June 1939, he advised them to form a committee and begin raising funds for a court case. As the LATCS and their allies had already done so, this response was not helpful. However, the desire of the NAACP to add another case to the snow-ball

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<sup>223</sup> Lyman Johnson to Kentucky Negro Educational Association, letter, April 22, 1939, Johnson UofL. LATCS and Lyman Johnson to the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, letter, May 2, 1939, Johnson UofL.



encouraged them. The NAACP required they pay for their local lawyer, court fees, and expenses for Thurgood Marshall when he came to Louisville, but in turn Marshall would serve as their special counsel at no cost.<sup>224</sup>

Taking on a salary equity case was not new for the NAACP. Beginning in 1936, the organization launched a major campaign to raise African-American teachers' salaries to the level of their white counterparts in states with segregated schools. They began the fight in Maryland because its teachers had tenure, making them safe from dismissal for filing a suit, and state law prescribed a discriminatory salary schedule. While it took time and multiple lawsuits, the NAACP won a victory when the courts ordered all salaries equalized. They also achieved victory in Virginia, though they struggled getting a case to court without the plaintiff first being fired, rendering the case moot. The NAACP's focus on these efforts accounts for the slow response to Louisville's inquiry, but that time also gave the NAACP experience in the best practices for achieving victory.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Tushnet, 90; George C. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Volume Two: In Pursuit of Equity, 1890-1980* (The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992)162-168.

<sup>225</sup> Leon A. Ransom, "Education and the Law," *The Journal of Negro Education* 10, No. 4 (October 1941): 712-718; Ada F. Coleman, "The Salary Equalization Movement," *The Journal of Negro Education* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1947):235-241; Bruce Beezer, "Black Teachers' Salaries and the Federal Courts Before Brown V. Board of Education: One Beginning for Equity," *The Journal of Negro Education* 55, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 200-213; Scott Baker, "Testing Equality: The National Teacher Examination and the NAACP's Legal Campaign to Equalize Teachers' Salaries in the South, 1936-63," *History of Education Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 49-64; John A. Kirk, "The NAACP Campaign for Teachers' Salary Equalization: African American Women Education and the Early Civil Rights Struggle," *The Journal of African American History* 94, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 529-552.

In the fall of 1939, with the help of the Urban League and now the national office of the NAACP, the LATCS began the work of preparing a case against the Board of Education. Charles Anderson declined their offer to serve as their lawyer. As the President of the local NAACP chapter and a state legislator, he could not give the case his full attention. The teachers then retained J. Prentice Thomas, a partner in Anderson's law firm, as their attorney. They then worked to raise the necessary funds to take the Board of Education to court. They also began the search for a plaintiff should they move forward with a suit. The committee's search for a plaintiff focused on female teachers who planned to soon marry and then leave their jobs. This way, should they be fired for participating in the suit they would not have derailed a career, as happened in Virginia. They also needed someone with a strong track record in the schools and a spotless reputation. In the end, they selected Vallateen Dudley, who was engaged to be married (Vallateen is usually referred to as "Valla" in the press and correspondence). Dudley had a strong educational background, with a Bachelor of Science degree from Michigan State Normal College and graduate work at both the University of Michigan and Columbia University. For the past decade, Dudley worked as a teacher at Jackson Colored Junior High School. Only Dudley, Johnson, and the lawyers knew she agreed to serve as the plaintiff. They all worked to keep her name a secret to protect her employment. At one point, Superintendent Scott threatened to fire Johnson and the teachers on the equalization committee if they did not give up the plaintiff's identity, but they called his bluff and none of them lost their jobs.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> NAACP to Louisville Teachers, letter, October 17, 1939, Johnson UofL; Tusnet, 90; Lyman T. Johnson, interview by Regina Monsour, Louisville, November 10, 1977, Johnson UofL; "Abington versus Board of Education of Louisville" Notable Kentucky African-Americans Database,

As all of the elements fell into place, Marshall and the national office wanted to take the Board of Education to trial immediately, feeling confident that the published discriminatory salary schedule was all they needed for a win, but the local movement disagreed. Given that the Board of Education officially acknowledged the discriminatory pay schedule and promised to rectify the problem, they wanted to wait to see if they would deny the city's African-American teachers equal pay in the contracts for the 1940-1941 school year. Should they go to court and lose, the Board might go back on their commitment to rectify the pay discrepancy. In the spring of 1940, the LATCS received reports that the Board of Education was seriously studying the equalization issue. The LATCS told their fellow citizens that the weeks prior to the distribution of the 1940-1941 contracts in early April were a critical period. They encouraged their fellow teachers and allies to write letters to members of the Board of Education and to donate to the fund for a potential court case. As they awaited news on salary equalization for African-American educators, the Board instead dealt all teachers in Louisville a significant blow.<sup>227</sup>

The Board of Education announced they were freezing the salary schedule for the upcoming 1940-1941 school year contracts. This meant that no teachers, black or white, would receive their regularly scheduled pay increases. This included other salary upgrades, such as the \$200 increase for male teachers once they completed

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[http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note\\_id=1790](http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note_id=1790); "Move for Equal Salaries in Louisville Schools," *The Crisis*, December 1940.

<sup>227</sup> NAACP to Louisville Teachers, letter, October 17, 1939, Johnson UofL; Lyman T. Johnson, interview by Regina Monsour, Louisville, November 10, 1977, Johnson UofL; Joint Committee for the Equalization of Teachers' Salaries to Fellow-Citizens, letter, 1940, Johnson UofL.

three years of service. While this may have been political gamesmanship by the Board—the public could not expect them to equalize salaries for African-Americans when they could not even afford the regular schedule—the city’s current school tax rate was insufficient to cover salary increases for the 1940-1941 school year. The reason for the shortfall had nothing to do with race. Over the past five years, far fewer teachers left their positions each year than had in years past. Superintendent Scott reported that in a typical year they hired around one-hundred new teachers, all of whom would be near the bottom of the salary schedule. However, over the past few years they only hired around fifty new teachers a year. The more veteran teachers the system employed, the higher their salaries crept each year. The Board blamed this shift on the repeal of the law prohibiting married female teachers, leading women with experience to stay in the system after their weddings. Therefore, as Lyman Johnson anticipated, the Board’s promise to begin equalizing their salaries if and when conditions justified meant the city’s black teachers would likely need to go to court.<sup>228</sup>

Despite such disappointing news from the Board, the local movement still stalled on filing a case against them, an action for which Marshall and the NAACP were growing impatient. The Louisville teachers recognized that the Board froze everyone’s salary, and feared pushing too hard under those financial circumstances would set the movement back. While they continued to frustrate the NAACP, the local Louisville movement did take Marshall’s advice on one very important issue. Marshall

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<sup>228</sup> Lyman T. Johnson, interview by Regina Monsour, Louisville, November 10, 1977, Johnson UofL; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, May 16, 1941; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky to Mayor Joseph Scholtz, letter, unknown, Johnson UofL; *The Courier-Journal*, May 17, 1941.

told them to build up goodwill for the salary equalization in the community. The LATCS, Urban League, and local NAACP sent teachers to meet with all of the major political players in the city, including the Mayor and the Board of Alderman (Louisville's legislative body). They also contacted influential businessmen and the Chamber of Commerce. Johnson reported that almost everyone they contacted chose to align with the teachers. Mayor Joseph D. Scholtz publically declared that the salary schedule was unfair and he felt the Board of Education was giving the teachers the run around. The local press was another important ally they cultivated. The editor of the Courier Journal, Mark Ethridge, was a staunch southern liberal. His paper gave the movement support in its articles, numerous editorials, and political cartoons until the end of the campaign. Ethridge even sent encouraging correspondence to Thurgood Marshall regarding the campaign. Other local press, like the Louisville Times, also supported the teachers. These efforts created a positive climate for the movement as they prepared to take the next steps.<sup>229</sup>

In the fall of 1940, the time finally came to move forward with legal action against the Board of Education. They knew that the Board of Education must ask the Board of Alderman for more money. At this point, they all recognized it would take a lawsuit to spur them to action. On November 6, 1940, the Board received a petition prepared by attorney Prentice Thomas on behalf of Vallateen Dudley. In the document, Miss Dudley asked that the Board eliminate the salary differential. She requested they raise her salary from \$1490 to the unrestricted salary amount of \$1750.

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<sup>229</sup> Doyle, 266; George C. Wright, "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The Lincoln Independent Party of 1921" *The Journal of Negro History* 68, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 8-23.

She also asked that the Board make this adjustment for all African-American teachers and principals in the Louisville public school system. The Board of Education scheduled a special hearing for December 3, 1940, to discuss this petition.<sup>230</sup>

At the hearing, whose attendees included Thurgood Marshall and a large number of teachers, the Board of Education reiterated their intentions to remove the salary differential when they deemed it financially feasible. The cost of eliminating the salary differential for the 269 African-American educators in Louisville was \$52,000. Presumably, this amount would increase each year as they moved up the salary scale. The current tax rate would not support this change for the 1941-1942 school year. It would not even support reducing the wage gap over five years as they originally planned. While all present understood the financial constraints, it angered those present that the Board refused to go on record saying they would ask for more money from the city. Under the law, the Board created a budget and asked the Board of Alderman to implement a school tax rate that would support that budget. How could African-Americans get their fair share if the Board would not even ask for the money? As put by *The Crisis* the following month, “The ‘when-and-if possible’ statement of the Board of Education is not a sufficient answer to those who cannot see why Negroes should be paid less than whites of no higher qualifications.” Disappointed, but not surprised, by the Board of Education’s response to Dudley’s petition, Thomas filed the suit in Federal District Court on December 5, 1940.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> “Move for Equal Salaries in Louisville Schools,” *The Crisis* 47, no. 11 (December 1940). Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, to Mayor Joseph Scholtz, letter, December 21, 1940, Johnson UofL.

<sup>231</sup> “Editorials of the Month,” *The Crisis* 48, no. 1 (January 1941).

The Board of Education's inability to manage this issue and the subsequent filing of a lawsuit angered Louisville Mayor Joseph Scholtz and the Board of Alderman, who publically supported ending the discriminatory schedule. As the press observed, the case going to trial was a good thing for the NAACP's national campaign against salary discrimination, but it would not be good publicity for the city of Louisville. In a letter dated on December 21, 1940, the President of the Board of Education, John Miller, wrote to Mayor Scholtz to give him the Board's side of the story. Miller reminds the Mayor that back in April of 1939 the Board voted to eliminate the salary differential. However, financial considerations blocked them from equalizing the salary schedule or from even implementing their plan of a five-year staggered salary increase beginning with the 1940-1941 teacher contracts. Recently the Board of Alderman offered to raise the tax levy by two cents, which led many in the community to believe the Board now had the funds to equalize salaries. Miller reminds Mayor Scholtz that the increase only covered the current salary level for the current year and not any increases for the 1941-1942 school year, and it would take an additional two-cent tax increase to cover a salary equalization. He also reminds the Mayor that the Board is struggling to obtain money from the city to cover their obligations to retired schoolteachers. Given the current finances, how do the Mayor and the Aldermen expect them to answer the call for full salary equalization? Miller concludes with the following:

In order that the position of the Board of Education on this question cannot possibly be any longer misunderstood and in view of the fact that the Board of Alderman feels so strongly on this point that it is willing to

levy two cents for immediate equalization of the difference in salaries between white and colored teachers, we wish to state that full equalization will be made with the school year beginning September 1941... We make this statement relative to the removal of the differential with pleasure and not with reluctance. We are pleased that the Board of Aldermen insists on this step and naturally assume that this insistence carries with it the obligation of the taxing authority to make the accomplishment of this a financial possibility.<sup>232</sup>

While news of the Board of Education's position on this matter pleased supporters of equalization, all in the movement agreed they should not rescind the lawsuit until the Board finalized all of the arrangements. A hearing for the case was set for March 10, 1941. As they awaited the court date over the next few months, support for the equalization continued to grow throughout Louisville. The Courier-Journal and its editors continued to promote the need for equalization. Letters from white community leaders supporting equalization, like Bishop Charles Clingmen of the Diocese of Kentucky, arrived regularly in the offices of the Board of Education. The KNEA, Urban League, NAACP, and the LATCS committee continued fundraising for the pending court case. Meanwhile, the Association of Senior High School Women Teachers launched a separate campaign for salary equalization. This

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<sup>232</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, to Mayor Joseph Scholtz, letter, December 21, 1940, Johnson UofL; "Editorials of the Month," *The Crisis* 48, no. 1 (January 1941).



group called for the Board of Education to remove the salary differential between male and female teachers. According to the 1935 salary schedule, once a male teacher had three years of experience he received a \$200 pay increase. This applied to men on both the restricted and unrestricted salary schedules. The Association did not call for the elimination of the two-hundred-dollar raise, but rather that female teachers also receive the increase. Unlike the movement against racial discrimination, this Association did not receive much press nor did they have to make the extra efforts of raising funds for an expensive court case. As their calls for equalization began in mid-1940, the Association of Senior High School Women Teachers simply piggybacked on the African-American teachers' movement. If salaries were equalized based on race, then this group wanted them equalized on gender as well.<sup>233</sup>

On March 10, 1941, all eyes were on the United States District Court for the hearing of the *Abbington versus the Board of Education of Louisville* case, so named because Dudley had married by this time. Unfortunately, in court the Board of Education's counsel asked the judge to delay the hearing, and he agreed to push back the date to May 27. This meant there would not be a hearing before the Board sent out contracts for the 1941-1942 school year. This left the various groups fighting for salary equalization to wait and see if the Board would remove the restricted schedule on their own.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, January-May 1941. Kentucky Negro Educational Association to Lyman Johnson, various letters, Johnson UofL.

<sup>234</sup> George C. Wright, "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The Lincoln Independent Party of 1921" *The Journal of Negro History* 68, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 8-23.

On April 1, 1941, at a regularly scheduled meeting, the Board of Education resolved that section six of the salary schedule be repealed and abrogated effective at the end of the current school term. This action passed unanimously. The local press referred to this a confirmation of the Board's previously vague promise to end salary discrimination. However, after conducting a series of meetings amongst the various organizations involved, most in the movement wanted to wait for confirmation that the Board officially activated the pay increases for the 1941-1942 school year before they withdrew the lawsuit. With their April 1 vote to eliminate the salary differential, the Board of Education was surprised the teachers did not drop the lawsuit immediately. Thurgood Marshall and Prentice Thomas told the Board they would be happy to drop the suit if they would consent to a court decree. The Board declined. Correspondence among the campaign leadership reiterated their commitment to not rescinding the lawsuit until African-American teachers held in their hands contracts without the differential or had a court decree.<sup>235</sup>

Desiring to avoid court, on May 16, 1941, just eleven days before the hearing, the Board of Education took the final steps to end over seventy years of wage discrimination against a large cohort of its educators. Having already voted in April to

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<sup>235</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, April 1, 1941; CJ-date; Lyman Johnson to LATCS members, letter, April 5, 1941; Victory Perry to Superintendent Zenos Scott, letter, April 10, 1941, Johnson UofL; Lyman Johnson to S. L. Barker, letter, April 16, 1941, Johnson UofL; Louisville Education Equalization Committee to Kentucky Negro Educational Association, letter, April 16, 1941, Johnson UofL; Superintendent Zenos Scott to LATCS, letter, April 30, 1941, Johnson UofL; George C. Wright, "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The Lincoln Independent Party of 1921" *The Journal of Negro History* 68, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 8-23.

remove section six from the salary schedule, there is no mention of it or anything else regarding race at this meeting. Instead, the Board focused on rectifying other unequal aspects of the 1935 salary schedule. They voted in the affirmative to eliminate the sex differential in the salary schedule, which had given male teachers a \$200 pay increase after three years of service. Beginning with the 1941-1942 school year, all female teachers eligible for the \$200 increase would receive a salary increase of fifty dollars a year over four years. This also applied to men who did not receive the increase in 1940-1941 because of the salary schedule freeze. Going forward, the Board would continue to break up the \$200 increase into four \$50 increases for all teachers once they had three years of experience. The Board also eliminated the clause that allowed higher pay for teachers “ranked exceptionally high by the superintendent.” Given the increase in salary expenditures resulting from this vote and the vote to remove the racial differential, it was not surprising that the Board voted not to give back pay for the scheduled increases withheld for 1940-1941. They also voted not to advance all teachers an extra year on the salary schedule, but to simply move everyone up one year on the pay scale.<sup>236</sup>

While most of the Board’s actions on May 16 benefitted female African-American teachers, their significance to the campaign for racial equality was simple. In the May 16, 1941 meeting, the Board of Education of Louisville officially adopted an equalized pay schedule for the 1941-1942 contracts. With their vote, they finally fulfilled the promises they had been making since 1939. As the Board of Education warned for years, this would be an expensive change for the city of Louisville. The

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<sup>236</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky. Meeting Minutes, May 16, 1941.

cost increase for the upcoming contracts was an astounding \$205,000. Unfreezing the salary schedule for all teachers incurred the highest cost, at \$85,000, followed by a \$55,000 for the partial increase from eliminating the gender pay gap. The cost increase for eliminating the fifteen percent discrimination against the city's African-American educators was \$65,000. While the Board of Education and the Board of Alderman expressed concerns over the higher wage costs in the press, they also expressed satisfaction with the full equalization of pay for Louisville's teachers.<sup>237</sup>

While the African-American teachers of Louisville secured a victory, it was not enough for Marshall and the NAACP. They petitioned the District Court for a permanent restraining order to keep the Board of Education from returning to the old restricted schedule. As Marshall wrote in a letter to Prentice Thomas, "I do not trust any School Board...until I have a court decree filed in the case. In addition, we have the additional factor that the Louisville School Board is even worse than any I have gone up against so far." In July, Judge Shackelford Miller set a trial for October. When the appointed time came, the NAACP received its court decree.<sup>238</sup>

In the final equation, this was a major victory for African-American educators and the black community in general. Interestingly, it had little impact on Vallateen Abbington, who quietly left the school system as the case wound to a close. However, she deserves commendation for her willingness to serve as plaintiff. Abbington left

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<sup>237</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky. Meeting Minutes, May 16, 1941. *The Courier Journal*, May 17, 1941.

<sup>238</sup> George C. Wright, "Black Political Insurgency in Louisville, Kentucky: The Lincoln Independent Party of 1921" *The Journal of Negro History* 68, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 8-23; Tushnet, 90.

Louisville and moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where she earned her legacy as a social worker, civic leader, and civil rights leader. Despite the positive impact on Louisville educators, the final outcome of the effort in Louisville appeared to disappoint the NAACP. Instead of a traditional court victory, they settled for a restraining order against a Board who had already equalized salaries. The NAACP's lack of enthusiasm mirrors the fact that *The Crisis* reported nothing on the outcome in Louisville, not even mentioning the court decree. However, Louisville's successful battle for salary equality spread to other communities across the state of Kentucky.<sup>239</sup>

While Louisville's salary struggle became a thing of the past, the battle continued for the NAACP elsewhere in the South. Over the next few years, the NAACP earned salary equalization victories in eleven southern states. However, even when the African-American teachers won a victory, change was slow to come. While Louisville's African-American teachers received full equalization right away, in virtually all of the school districts where the courts ordered salary equalization it took a number of years of incremental increases to achieve salary equity. The courts allowed Norfolk, Virginia's school board to equalize African-American teachers' salaries with them receiving a third of the difference in each of the three years. Worse were the districts who attempted to circumvent the order. Also in Virginia, the Newport News school board moved all teachers, black and white, to a new equal

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<sup>239</sup> "Abbingdon versus Board of Education of Louisville" Notable Kentucky African-Americans Database, [http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note\\_id=1790](http://nkaa.uky.edu/record.php?note_id=1790); "Educational Front," *The Crisis*, September 1941; Commonwealth of Kentucky, Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, *Kentucky's Black Heritage: The Role of the Black People in the History of Kentucky from Pioneer Days to the Present* (Frankfort: Ransom, 1971) 712-718; Coleman, 235-241; Beezer, 200-213; Baker, 49-64; Kirk, 529-552.

salary schedule, but moved black teachers into the schedule based on their current salaries. This meant that while their pay increases over the subsequent years would match white teachers, they still made less than white teachers with comparable education and experience did because they started the new schedule at a lower salary amount. Eventually, many southern states shifted from structured salary schedules to merit pay, where teachers received varying pay based on a variety of qualifications. Unsurprisingly, these merit schedules resulted in most black teachers and principals designated at lower classifications than their white peers. The NAACP challenged these new merit pay schedules in court and lost. The subjective nature of the merit pay structures made it difficult to ascertain clear discrimination, though the evidence showed continued disparity in teacher salaries between white and black educators. In light of these challenges to their other salary equity “victories,” it is surprising the NAACP did not more loudly laud the clear-cut Louisville victory.<sup>240</sup>

While the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People did not always achieve their desired outcomes, their salary equalization campaign was generally a success. Of the thirty-two salary equalization cases the NAACP brought to court, they won the verdict in twenty-three. The few cases they lost were because of technicalities, not their constitutionality. Perhaps even more importantly, these cases proved that federal courts expected school districts to uphold the equal in “separate but equal.” With this in mind, the NAACP and local African-American organizations

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<sup>240</sup> Ransom, 712-718; Coleman, 235-241; Beezer, 200-213; Baker, 49-64; Kirk, 529-552.

launched efforts throughout nation to force educational equality. Many, like Thurgood Marshall, hoping that forcing equality might end segregated education for good.<sup>241</sup>

Those studying the NAACP's salary equity movement will struggle to find information on Louisville's role in the fight. In works on these efforts, either writers do not mention Louisville, mention only Abbington in a list of other plaintiffs, or suggest that Louisville teachers made some inquiries but give no mention of the case and its outcome. It is unclear why this successful effort remains overlooked. The NAACP papers at the Library of Congress contain a wide array of documents on the case. Yet, it is common for works on the movement to discuss the Virginia and Maryland cases and then simply bypass the Louisville case and discuss the NAACP's efforts to equalize educator salaries in Florida. The motives of other writers are unknown, but this does not negate the fact that Louisville's grassroots efforts, supplemented by support from the NAACP, resulted in a significant victory for its African-American community.<sup>242</sup>

### **The Fight for a New Central High School**

Galvanized by their victory in the salary fight, Louisville's African-Americans continued the fight for equal educational opportunities. In the late 1940s, the primary battle in Louisville was for a new facility for Central Colored High School. Inspired by the NAACP's strategy outlined in the Margold Report, the Kentucky's African-

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<sup>241</sup> Coleman, 235-241.

<sup>242</sup> Ransom, 712-718; Coleman, 235-241; Beezer, 200-213; Baker, 49-64; Kirk, 529-552.

Americans successfully forced the state to desegregate their graduate programs and many undergraduate institutions by the early 1950s. As the possibility of a lawsuit against Louisville's segregated schools increased, the city's Board of Education made some symbolic steps to appease the African-American community. However, after a scathing evaluation of Central's school plant in 1943 and rising calls for a new building, the Board finally began taking steps to this end in 1945. Unfortunately, bad management of the project and rising building costs threatened to derail the venture. Fortunately, a poor evaluation of Central High School's campus by the accrediting agency in 1949 and the increased likelihood of a lawsuit placed enough pressure on the Board that they finally took the final steps toward giving the black community the new high school they so deserved.

In the years following Louisville's successful salary equity battle, African-Americans in Kentucky continued to fight for equality, as did the national NAACP office. The NAACP focused their efforts on the strategy laid out in the Margold Report of 1931. Composed by attorney Nathan Margold to determine the best use of a \$100,000 donation earmarked for a legal campaign for African-American constitutional rights, the Margold Report became the playbook for the NAACP's legal efforts for decades. In his report, Margold suggested that instead of confronting segregation directly they should challenge if segregated institutions lived up to the separate but equal premise. NAACP leadership determined that graduate and professional schools should be the first point of attack. As very few of these institutions existed for African-Americans, states would have to justify why they provided public funds for white graduate institutions, but made no equal accommodations for black students. If the NAACP won cases at the graduate level,



they planned to turn to desegregating undergraduate institutions, then high schools with the end goal of taking on public school desegregation in general.<sup>243</sup>

The desegregation of schools in Kentucky played out along the lines proposed in the Margold Report. In Kentucky, African-American students had no graduate school institutions, nor did the state's black university, Kentucky State College, offer all the majors found at the University of Kentucky. In 1938, the Supreme Court ruled in *Gaines v. ex. re. Missouri* that states must admit African-Americans to all-white colleges if they did not provide truly equal separate facilities and opportunities. This left Kentucky vulnerable to challenges to their segregated system. Between 1939 and 1948, three African-American men attempted to enroll at the University of Kentucky and all three failed for different reasons. Throughout these cases, the University of Kentucky and the state government worked ardently to make it appear that Kentucky accommodated their black students. However, it was clear that one strong case could dismantle the entire segregated enterprise.<sup>244</sup>

This case came when Lyman Johnson applied for admission to the University of Kentucky's doctoral program for history in 1948. Given Johnson's impressive academic record, which included a master's degree in history from the University of

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<sup>243</sup> Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown V. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 132-137.

<sup>244</sup> John Hardin, "'Kentucky is More or Less Civilized': Alfred Carroll, Charles Eubanks, Lyman Johnson, and the Desegregation of Kentucky Higher Education, 1939-1949," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 109, no. 3/4 (Summer/Autumn 2011): 327-350; "Clark and the Lyman Johnson Case," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 103, no. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 2005): 407-420; George C. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Volume Two: In Pursuit of Equity, 1890-1980* (The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992) 177-185; *Kentucky's Black Heritage*, 98-101.

Michigan, the University of Kentucky rejected his application on the grounds that admitting him violated the Day Law. The Day Law, which passed the Kentucky legislature in 1904, forbade mixed race education. Unlike the three gentlemen who fought for admission to the University of Kentucky prior to Johnson, the state could find no practical way to work around Johnson's challenge as they had in the past. As such, Johnson filed a lawsuit in August 1948. Backed by the Kentucky NAACP branch—the national office focused on cases in Texas and Oklahoma— and with limited financial resources, Johnson's case went to court in the spring of 1949. With expert witnesses that included white professors and students from the University of Kentucky and an utter lack of defense by the state, the federal judge ruled on March 30, 1949, that the University of Kentucky must allow Johnson to enroll. Giving the state no time to try to circumvent the order, thirty African-American students enrolled in graduate courses at the University of Kentucky in the summer of 1949.<sup>245</sup>

While *Johnson v. University of Kentucky* opened the door for desegregated graduate education, undergraduate educational access remained unequal. However, the Kentucky state legislature, no longer willing to shoulder the cost and impracticalities of maintaining segregation at the undergraduate level, amended the Day Law in 1950. Under its new revisions, higher education institutions could desegregate their undergraduate and graduate programs if they so chose. The revisions permitted African-American students to attend these institutions if Kentucky State College did not offer a comparable course. A number of schools, including the University of Louisville, chose to open their doors to African-American students. The University of

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

Kentucky continued to allow only graduate students and did not desegregate its undergraduate programs until after the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954.<sup>246</sup>

The state of Kentucky's inability to maintain segregation at the collegiate level meant African-American students might challenge other aspects of the states' educational offerings. If they followed the Margold Report, the high schools would be next. Thanks to the legislative efforts of Charles Anderson, students whose rural communities chose not to support an African-American high school (on the grounds they did not have enough students to justify the investment) received scholarships to attend and even board at high schools elsewhere in the state, such as the Lincoln Institute. This meant that Louisville and Lexington, both housing the vast majority of the states' black population, stood to be the likely focus of any lawsuits. However, Lexington had little to fear. In 1915, the Lexington Board of Education voted to approve the black community's petition for a new high school facility. Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School opened in 1922. This left Louisville vulnerable, especially its black school facilities.<sup>247</sup>

No one in the 1940s would dispute the superiority of African-American education in Louisville relative to that provided elsewhere in Kentucky and in most of the South. Teachers now received pay based on experience regardless of race. Black

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<sup>246</sup> Doyle, 367-8; *Kentucky's Black Heritage*, 100; George C. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Volume Two: In Pursuit of Equity, 1890-1980* (The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 185; Becky Riddle, "Desegregation of UK," Explore KY History, <http://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/145>.

<sup>247</sup> Dunnigan, 347-398; George C. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Volume Two: In Pursuit of Equity, 1890-1980* (The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 119-121.

schools were located in areas accessible to black students. Students of all races could ride buses to school. Adult education and evening classes were open to both black and white adults. The school board's annual report, printed for the public, featured information and pictures for both black and white schools. There is no doubt that Louisville's Board of Education prided themselves on the education they provided for their African-American students.

However, a glaring slight remained over the entry of every African-American school in Louisville—the use of the word “colored” in all black school names. In April 1945, a group of Central students and their parents attended a meeting of the Board of Education. While there, they read petitions requesting that “Colored” be removed and “Central High School” become the school's official name. The Board asked their attorney to check on whether there was a legal impediment to making the change. The following month at the next meeting, the attorney informed the Board that nothing stood in the way of the name change and the Board voted to approve the request. Exactly two years later, the superintendent reported receiving requests to also remove “colored” from the city's two black junior high schools. After a discussion, the Board unanimously voted to remove “colored” from all African-American schools in the city.<sup>248</sup>

Despite this symbolic gesture, year after year the annual reports of the Board of Education demonstrated the continued inferiority of black school facilities. Throughout the 1940s, more black schools than white used stove heaters. Reports found inferior frame construction in far more black school buildings than white.

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<sup>248</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky. Meeting Minutes from April 3, 1945; May 1, 1945; April 1, 1947.

Observers found portables at infinitely more African-American schools than white school campuses. In fact, two black elementary schools had no main building; those entire schools were an assembly of portables. Almost half of the white elementary schools housed gymnasiums compared to a less than seven percent of black elementary schools. As previously reported, for decades the Board allowed industrial education equipment and facilities at black schools to remain inferior to white offerings. A 1943 survey of all of Louisville's schools scored each school's facility and gave it a score out of 1000. A number of white elementary schools scored over 700, some even close to 900. Meanwhile, only one black elementary scored over 600 and some scored under 400. The survey pointed out that some African-American schools facilities actually pre-dated the creation of public schools for African-Americans in 1870 due to the practice of placing black schools in old white school buildings.<sup>249</sup>

In this survey, Central High School scored only 480. In comparison, Male High School scored 767 and Ahrens Trade High school scored 741. For the city's African-American community, the Central High School facility served as a reminder of the inferiority of black schools in Louisville. These feelings related to the consistent practice of the Board of Education using bond funds to build new white schools while neglecting the needs of black schools other than adding portables or small additions.

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<sup>249</sup> *Louisville Public School Survey* (Louisville: City of Louisville, 1943); Board of Education of Louisville Kentucky. Annual Reports, 1938-1942. After the Thirty-first Report for 1941-1942, the Board of Education stopped regularly publishing their annual reports. After World War II, the Board would sometimes publish annual reports, but these were intended for the public and read more like pamphlets and contained few of the details found in the old annual reports. As such, it is difficult to ascertain exact values for African-American school property past this date.

Public calls for a new facility for Central, as opposed to moving to yet another building left by whites who moved out, dated back to 1935 when at the Practical Arts annex's dedication Reverend J. A. Johnson asked the Board of Education members in attendance when Central could expect a new facility. In this speech, he also referenced the new schools found in smaller cities, like Lexington.<sup>250</sup>

One wonders why the Board of Education had not worked to rectify the inferiority of Central High School years before. Most likely, it is because African-American students at Louisville's Central High School received better educational opportunities than their white contemporaries in most areas of Kentucky and their African-American peers elsewhere in the South. This juxtaposition harkens back to the problems faced by Louisville's black educators when they sought salary equity. Because the Board could make a clear case for the superiority of Central to many white Kentucky high schools and virtually all black high schools in the South, they trivialized the inequalities between Louisville's white and black high schools. As Lyman Johnson described the problem, "Most black schools in Kentucky were grossly inferior to the white schools. They were separate but certainly not equal. On the other hand, Central had better facilities than most other southern schools for Negroes. I know because I was business manager for Central's ball teams, and I traveled with them to such schools."<sup>251</sup>

So what did it finally take to get the Board of Education to invest in a new facility for Central High School? As previously stated, the 1943 survey of the

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<sup>250</sup> *Louisville Leader*, December 21, 1935; *Louisville Defender*, December 21, 1935.

<sup>251</sup> Doyle, 259; William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011) 271-334.

condition of Louisville's schools said that a new building for Central was "the most urgent need in the city." There was absolutely no doubt that the facility had major problems. School leadership regularly called exterminators to deal with the basement rats that occasionally roamed the classrooms. The hallways were so narrow students had a difficult time moving between classes. As a result, the school adopted a one-way rule for all hallways and stairwells. In winter months, even with the heat on the main building struggled to keep the temperature above sixty degrees. As articulated by Ann Allen, a Central student who wrote a letter to the editor of the Courier-Journal in 1943:

How are we expected to concentrate on our work in a room that is cold and overcrowded? Our health is being jeopardized in a building of this sort and it is causing many students to leave school. We, the students of Central High, cordially invite you to come and view the school and see for yourself the conditions we have to cope with. And, after you have observed them, we hope that you will join our fight not for new facilities but for an altogether new school.<sup>252</sup>

The poor condition of Central High School's campus only became worse after two separate fires at Central exacerbated these problems. The first fire took place in November 1945. The press reported it as a three-alarm blaze, which originated in the

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<sup>252</sup> Thelma Cayne Tilford-Weathers, *A History of Louisville Central High School, 1882-1982* (Louisville, Kentucky, 1982); Ann Allen, letter to the editor, *The Courier-Journal*, February 19, 1943.

basement and went through all three upper floors. Every window in the building broke and the entire school had smoke damage and blackened walls and ceilings. The woodworking class space received the worst damage, followed by the domestic science and sewing rooms. The building remained closed for well over a week, and the Board did not replace many of the supplies for the vocational training courses for as long as Central remained in that facility. Officials never determined the cause of this fire, but many suspected arson. The second fire occurred on March 9, 1947. This fire began on the first floor and proved difficult for firefighters to put out. Due to the age of the building, firefighters needed a total of nine lines of hose running for over two hours to suppress the blaze. The assistant superintendent estimated the total damages at \$15,000. This time, Central reopened quickly, but many classrooms stayed closed during the repairs. That two dangerous fires took place in less than two years heightened the anxiety of students shuffling through the narrow hallways Ann Allen described.<sup>253</sup>

Meeting minutes confirm that the Board of Education finally began making moves toward a new Central facility the same month as the first fire in November of 1945. The Board does not explain why they finally began taking these much needed steps, though public outcry over the building's poor condition (the local NAACP branch made a new high school one of their top action priorities in 1943) and the harsh assessment it received in the 1943 survey are the most likely factors. The Board of Education moved quickly to choose a site for a new Central High School campus, and made the decision to begin buying all of the properties bounded by Esquire, Chestnut,

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<sup>253</sup> *The Courier Journal*, November 28, 1945; March 9, 1947; March 10, 1947; Curry, 47; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, December 4, 1945.



Eleventh, and Twelfth Streets in January 1946. The Board also agreed to sell some of their securities in order to raise the \$300,000 needed to begin purchasing the needed property. By May 1946, the Board purchased all but one of the properties on the new Central site. Despite local interest in the subject, the local press did not report of these first steps toward a new Central.<sup>254</sup>

In June 1946, the Board of Education voted to put forward a bond to pay for new school construction. They called for an \$8,000,000 bond, which they believed would provide funds for ten new school buildings and nine additions. Frank Stanley, the owner and editor of the Louisville Defender, attended a Board meeting and asked what they intended to do for African-American schools. The Board responded that the plans included a new facility for Central High School and Booker T. Washington Colored Elementary School, as well as additions for Jackson Street Junior High School and Virginia Avenue Elementary School. One of the schools scheduled to receive a new facility was duPont Manual High School. This school received a score of 493, just slightly higher than Central's 480, in the 1943 school survey. While Manual clearly needed a new facility, the African-American community would not have supported any bond that gave Manual a new school facility if Central was not to receive one. Given the resurgence of African-American influence in local politics, the Board knew they would not get their bond to pass without black community support. To that end, in the Board's efforts to secure support for the bond they used pictures in the campaign materials of African-American students walking back into their school

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<sup>254</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, November 6, 1945; December 4, 1945; January 7, 1946; May 7, 1946; *The Louisville Leader*, March 20, 1943.

building from portables. The bond passed in November 1946, and Louisville's African-American community eagerly awaited a new campus for Central High School.<sup>255</sup>

While the purchase of properties and the approval of the bond demonstrated significant movement toward a new facility for Central, it was the fall of 1952 before the new Central High School facility opened its doors to students. There were a number of factors contributing to the delay including issues securing all of the needed properties, problems getting residents out of the properties, and hesitation by the Board to move forward until they established final costs for other building projects. Meanwhile, Louisville's African-American community grew increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress for Central as they watched the Board break ground on new white school facilities. The Board's slow progress on making a new Central High School plant a reality is akin to their behavior regarding salary equity. The Board of Education and superintendents acknowledged that Central needed a new campus and even made financial investments, but expected the black community to be patient as the Board took action on their own timetable. For example, in April 1946 while purchasing one of the homes for the Central site, the Board agreed to give the owners of the property permission to allow the home's tenant to remain for one more year. Ultimately, the Board would literally pay a high price for dragging their feet.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, June 7, 1946; October 1, 1946; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, "Achievement, Annual Report, Your Louisville, Public Schools," Yancey Altsheler Papers, University of Louisville Archive, Louisville, KY; Omer Carmichael Papers; Jefferson County Public Schools Archives, Louisville, KY.

<sup>256</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, April 2, 1946.

One of the Board of Education's main problems making movement toward breaking ground on a new Central High School was their inability to secure all of the properties on the proposed site. While the Board's realtor secured all of the other sixty-nine lots by May 1946, one owner refused to accept the Board's offer. Mr. A.R. Curry owned lots 51 and 52, home to several rental properties. Mr. Curry told the Board's realtor he would not accept less than \$11,000 for both lots. Despite back and forth negotiations, the Board told their agent to offer him no more than \$9,500, which Mr. Curry continued to refuse. Two years later in 1948, Mr. Curry still had not folded, so the Board finally agreed to offer him \$11,000. Mr. Curry then said he wanted \$12,500 since the properties increased in value, but the Board would not acquiesce. As of October 1950, the Board still did not have the property, which continued to prevent them from breaking ground on the new high school. Superintendent Carmichael then proposed that if Mr. Curry did not accept a final offer of \$9,500, they would begin condemnation proceedings under the right of eminent domain. The formal resolution for these proceedings cleared in late November 1950 and by September 1951 the Board secured the property and Mr. Curry only received \$7633. As part of the condemnation settlement, Mr. Curry's tenants remained in their residencies for the time being. These residents were just a small part of the problem the Board had getting people out of the buildings so they could begin clearing the site.<sup>257</sup>

In the summer of 1948, the press announced the Board's intentions of auctioning off the homes they had purchased for the Central site. Purchasers would

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<sup>257</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, January 7, 1946; March 5, 1946; May 7, 1946; April 6, 1948; October 16, 1950; November 29, 1950; January 15, 1951; September 17, 1951.

then have the homes moved to another location. This announcement of an auction prompted an outcry from the tenants living at the Central site. At that time, rental homes for African-Americans were scarce, and the tenants could not secure other housing. In an effort to help the 90 families living there, Louisville's Mayor Farnsley stepped up to offer assistance in relocating the families. Difficulties in finding them new homes prompted the Mayor to ask the Board of Education to delay and give the tenants more time. Despite the additional time, at the end of 1949, *The Courier-Journal* reported that none of the tenants had found housing. In January 1950, Superintendent Carmichael assured the residents the Board would not be asking them to leave soon, as the plans for Central were still in the early phases.<sup>258</sup>

Despite Carmichael's statements, in April 1950, the Board voted to send letters to the residents occupying the buildings they purchased on the Central site. These occupants would have to vacate the properties no later than August 1. The Board did not need them to leave until September, but they all agreed it was better to provide a few weeks for any stragglers. As it turned out, a month would not be enough. The tenants still lacked housing options and in May 1950 a group of city officials, builders, and real estate agents gathered to discuss ways to help those families. They determined that the affected families receive priority for any vacancies in government housing and the Emergency Housing Center would take in any remaining tenants unable to find homes.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, July 31, 1948; August 14, 1950; August 15, 1948; December 18, 1949; January 6, 1950.

<sup>259</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, April 17, 1950; May 15, 1950; *The Courier-Journal*, May 26, 1950; May 30, 1950.

In mid-August 1950, the Board received word that many of the residences remained occupied. A major problem was renters not moving out because they had been unable to secure new lodgings, which did not come as a surprise. Another problem was that as soon as any authorized tenants moved out, squatters moved into the units and claimed squatter's rights. This meant the Board needed to obtain forceful detainers under Kentucky state law. By mid-October, the Board got word that the majority of the homes were unoccupied and construction crews arrived by the end of the month to begin clearing the site. By March 1951, the site was finally clear and construction could begin.<sup>260</sup>

While the Board of Education was not at fault for not anticipating the problems with Mr. Curry or getting the residents out of the sold properties, they certainly could have moved faster. While the Board agreed in 1946 to undergo condemnation proceedings if any owners refused to sell for a reasonable rate, they waited over four years before they began the process to secure Mr. Curry's properties. The Board also waited until 1950 to issue notices to the tenants to leave the buildings on the Central site, but they could have started that process in 1947. Meanwhile, the Board had two white elementary schools built and occupied by 1950 with the bond money from 1946. Many in the African-American community grew increasingly impatient and began to believe the Board of Education was intentionally stalling on breaking ground for Central's new facility. They were not incorrect.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, August 14, 1950; October 16, 1950; March 19, 1951; *The Courier-Journal*, October 29, 1950.

<sup>261</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, May 16, 1949.

The Board's lack of action on Central was not malicious, but it was intentional. The Board of Education faced increasing financial strain in these years. Due to the beginnings of suburbanization, tax receipts declined in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Meanwhile, the population of children needing education continued to grow. While the Board publically announced Central High School as the top priority under the bond of 1946, during the aforementioned delays the Board approved the builds for Hazelwood and MacArthur Elementary schools. As costs rose and income declined, the Board wanted to wait until the final costs for these elementary schools came in before they finalized plans for Central's building project. While inconvenient, the Board was wise to wait. The finances for the schools became so bad that in the fall of 1950, the Board took out a three million dollar loan just to have money to get through the end of the school year. Despite the wisdom of waiting for the financial outlook before finalizing plans for Central, even the Board knew that it looked to the public like they were stalling. In the spring of 1950, Board member Walter Girdler asked that then Superintendent Carmichael create a timetable for Central's construction as they would all be criticized for unnecessary delay of the project. The Board continued to lean on Carmichael for more answers during subsequent Board meetings.<sup>262</sup>

The Board of Education's increased concerns about community unrest over Central's delays were not unfounded. For years the local African-American community wanted answers for why construction on a new black high school had not yet begun. The inquiries started in 1947 after action began on the two new white elementary schools, but there was no word on plans for Central. In one of many visits

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<sup>262</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, February 21, 1949; April 17, 1950; May 1, 1950; May 15, 1950; September 18, 1950.

to the Board's meetings, Reverend T.S. Ledbetter, Chairman of the Citizens Committee of the Central High School Parent Teacher Association, expressed the community's concerns:

Inasmuch as the negro citizenry hearkened to your appeal and supported the Bond Issue, is it not within the bounds of reasonable diplomacy and good faith for the Board to follow up initial steps in the erection of the new building and keep the partners and community informed as to progress in that connection? We know that someday we shall have a new building. We need it now—and have needed it for a long time already.<sup>263</sup>

Community concerns over the lack of progress on Central High School grew to a crescendo in early 1950. Parties interested in this project confronted the Board over a number of reports circulating in the community. One rumor said the Board no longer intended to build the school. Another said the Board told the architects to take as long as they could creating plans so as to delay the project. Yet another said that they needed another bond to afford the project. Concerned citizens also turned to the local government. When a delegation of parents met with Mayor Farnsley, he said he did not want to stick his neck into school board business, but he would see what he could do about the leaky roof at Central's current facility. The representative from the Municipal Housing Commission attributed the delay to the difficulties getting renters on the Central site into other housing. After a faulty faucet caused a flood at Central,

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<sup>263</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, May 6, 1947.

students walked out in strike and then sent representatives to meet with the mayor over the conditions at Central and the lack of progress on a new facility. Louisville's black community, while understanding the financial and practical circumstances, demanded the Board establish a start date for construction and for its completion.<sup>264</sup>

In addition to the Board informing them of the progress on Central, Louisville's black community wanted to be part of the planning process. As the high school was for a segregated population, they believed the Board must consult black educators, community leaders, and contractors. In May 1947, Central's PTA presented the Board of Education with their report on the desired direction for vocational education at the high school. With the new building, they saw an opportunity to upgrade Central's trade curriculum to the same level as the city's white high schools. No one was more active in this regard than Central's Principal Atwood Wilson. Wilson wrote a master's thesis for the University of Chicago entitled, "The Educational and Vocational opportunity of Colored Pupils in Louisville." The Board and Superintendent read his work, and Wilson actively promoted using his study as a blueprint for improving offerings at the new facility. He also took the initiative to have Central's faculty and staff create a 95-page report on the needs for the new campus. This comprehensive report included requests for equipment, classrooms needed by each department, and additional facilities like a large auditorium and gymnasium. It even included blueprints from the drafting department for the layout of the school based on the needs expressed in the report. Most importantly, the report stressed that academic preparation for entrances into college remain a focus, in addition to the

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<sup>264</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, February 20, 1950; March 2, 1948; *The Courier-Journal*, January 24, 1950; February 28, 1950.



vocational training courses. The Board received the report in October 1947, and Atwood told the press the report would serve as the basis for discussions when planning the new school plant. The community was pleased to learn in February 1948 that the Board hired an architect, that the plans for the school reflected the report from Wilson and his staff, and that the Board expected the building to be complete by 1951.<sup>265</sup>

Unfortunately, for reasons previously stated, these expectations would not come to fruition. The year 1949 came and went with no progress. However, when the new decade began there had been major changes in the political climate. As previously stated, by this time, major desegregations had taken place in Kentucky. First, there was the desegregation of the University of Kentucky's graduate school programs. Second, the state legislature's revision of the Day Law in 1950 led to the subsequent desegregation of a number of universities' undergraduate programs. Those developments increased the likelihood of a suit against the Louisville Board of Education if they could not prove the equality of their segregated offerings. Also making a lawsuit more likely was a 1949 analysis of Central High School by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (SACSCS). In 1932, Central gained accreditation through SACS and, as such, that institution held Central to certain standards. During a routine evaluation during the 1949-1950 school year, SACS

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<sup>265</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, May 6, 1947; February 3, 1948; February 19, 1948; *The Courier-Journal*, May 6, 1947; October 10, 1947; February 3, 1948; "Report and Recommendations to the Louisville Board of Education by the Special Committee on Vocational Curricula of the Central High School Parent-Teacher Association," report, Johnson UofL; "Suggestions for New Central High Building to Accommodate Fifteen Hundred Pupils," report, Johnson UofL.

determined that Central excelled in all areas except for their school facility. In order to maintain Central's "A" rating, they must improve their facilities. Their evaluation echoed the report Atwood Wilson submitted to SACS as part of their inspection. In it, he said Central's greatest need was a new school plant. He described the curriculum his faculty would pursue with improved facilities. His description of their ideal schoolhouse directly matched the recommendations he made to the Board of Education in 1947, which included a building to accommodate 1500 students, a library to seat 250, a spectator gymnasium seating 2500, and a swimming pool.<sup>266</sup>

A combination of growing pressure from the community, a possible lawsuit, the SACS report, and the pending clearance of the site finally prompted the Board of Education to begin making real progress on the Central High School build. However, as the plans began to move forward it was clear that their current Central campus plans would not live up to the black community's expectations. Based on the reception of the plans Wilson submitted in 1947, they had no reason to believe the new Central would be anything less than they had dreamed. However, financial considerations led Superintendent Carmichael to try modify the plans for Central and keep the build as cheap as possible. After years of waiting, Louisville's black community believed this was unacceptable. After meeting with a group representing Central, Carmichael reported that they insisted the Board incorporate certain facilities and services in the new school plant. These included an auditorium seating 1800, a gymnasium seating 3000 spectators, a swimming pool, and extra shop units for future expansion.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Curry, 28-33.

<sup>267</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, March 20, 1950.

Superintendent Carmichael told the Board he believed the 1200-person auditorium and 2500-spectator gymnasium the architects planned should be sufficient. However, the Board wanted Carmichael to price the items so they could make an informed choice. The Board members, beholden to voters, recognized that the new Central High School facility was not a typical school build. Rather, it was a chance to provide much needed services to the city's African-American citizens. For example, Louisville did not have an auditorium available to blacks that would seat more than 600 participants. The city also lacked a pool open to African-Americans during non-summer months. Over their next few meetings, the Board pressed Carmichael for more information on the plans for Central and what could be done to satisfy the black community. Carmichael said the architects committed to finalizing plans by the end of 1950.<sup>268</sup>

Once the involved parties finally completed the plans, the estimated cost for the new Central High School campus stood at \$3,500,000. When the Board proposed the bond in 1946, they earmarked about \$2,000,000 for the project. However, because they prioritized the two elementary school projects and dragged their feet on a number of issues relating to Central's construction, inflation and building costs rose. They would now have to pay considerably more. This made the demands of the African-American community harder to meet. However, representatives continued to come to Board meeting to ask about timetables and facilities. The Board finally agreed to finalize plans by December 1950 and take bids in January 1951. The final plans included most of what the African-American community expected. The auditorium

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<sup>268</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, March 20, 1950; March 2, 1948; May 1, 1950.

would seat almost 1500, which was larger than any white school auditorium in the city. The library would accommodate 200 and the cafeteria 600. The new gymnasium would seat 3000 spectators. In light of the success of Central's basketball team, they expected the gymnasium would be full even during regular season games. The only item not fulfilled in the plans was the natatorium. However, the Board was actively working with the city government to try to split the costs. Therefore, they took bids for that project separately.<sup>269</sup>

In February 1951, the Board finally discussed the received bids and realized they did not have the funds to cover the costs. They were short by \$500,000. They decided to give Carmichael an extra week to find more money before they officially awarded contracts for the Central build. The architect reported there were few savings in reducing the size of the gym or auditorium once they factored in the time delays for planning and construction. As such, those long-coveted spaces remained in the plans. Ultimately, Carmichael suggested cutting \$400,000 from the budget of a proposed new black elementary school. The African-American community agreed with this decision, concurring with the Board that Central remained the top priority. The Board also decided to invite the city to take on the full financial cost of the proposed pool and left the contract bids open. While this still left them somewhat over budget, Board

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<sup>269</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, May 15, 1950; July 10, 1950; October 16, 1950; November 20, 1950; November 16, 1950; November 29, 1950; January 15, 1951; *The Courier-Journal*, November 11, 1950; January 15, 1951; January 27, 1951.

member Yancey Altsheler commented that their spending was justified since the school would serve as the center of the city's African-American community.<sup>270</sup>

By March 1951, the houses whose residents so greatly delayed the project were no more. Construction began immediately with completion estimated for January 1953. In stark contrast to the slow pace of progress in getting the Central project out of the planning phases, the actual build went quickly. In May 1952, the Board announced that Central's new plant would open in the fall of 1952, though the auditorium and gymnasium would still be under construction. With the project nearing completion, the Board of Education announced that Central High School would be "the South's finest high school for Negro pupils."<sup>271</sup>

The year 1952 proved to be one of celebration for Central High School and Louisville's African-American community. In March, Central's basketball team won the National Negro High School Basketball Championship. The city lavished praise on the team, including a victory motorcade, photos with Mayor Farnsley, and keys to the city. In June, Central's Parent-Teacher Association successfully fundraised and purchased an organ for Central's new auditorium. This would be the only such organ in a Louisville school. Finally, in September 1952, Central High School's new facility

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<sup>270</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, February 5, 1951; February 12, 1951; *The Courier-Journal*, January 15, 1951; January 27, 1951; February 6, 1951; February 13, 1951; February 14, 1951.

<sup>271</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, March 19, 1951; *The Courier-Journal*, February 13, 1951; May 20, 1952; June 29, 1952.

opened to students. The final total cost of the facilities and equipment came to an astounding \$3,917,118.<sup>272</sup>

This proved to be money well spent as the Board of Education had not oversold the quality of the new campus to the community. The building had eighty classrooms and could easily accommodate up to 1800 students. In contrast to the dim and dank conditions at the old Central, the new building had floor-to-ceiling windows in the corridors and stairwells, and an entire wall of windows in each classroom. It housed a modern music suite with separate spaces for the school's orchestra, band, and chorus. The space also had six private practice spaces and a record listening room. The school included a state-of-the-art radio suite with plans to broadcast in places like the free public libraries. There was a courtyard outside the auditorium with a small stage for open-air productions. A large library with space for 12,000 volumes was on the third floor above the large, modern cafeteria. To create a more pleasant cafeteria atmosphere, the kitchen was located on the first floor and the staff sends all the prepared food to the cafeteria by dumbwaiter. Unlike the old Central building, which had no nurse and a small sick room, the new Central boasted a medical first-aid suite with a reception area, dental room, separate boys' and girls' bathrooms, and a vision testing room.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> *The Louisville Defender*, March 29, 1952; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, June 16, 1952; "This is Central High School: Louisville's Newest High School," booklet, Jefferson County Public School Archive.

<sup>273</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, June 29, 1952; July 11, 1952; "This is Central High School: Louisville's Newest High School," booklet, Jefferson County Public School Archive; *The Louisville Defender*, September 16, 1952.

The most important improvements for which the Board paid were the various classrooms and their equipment. For college preparatory students, large biology and chemistry laboratories allowed them to learn on excellent equipment. After decades of requests to improve Central's vocational offerings, the new facility offered new courses and new equipment. The school now offered nine new vocational courses in beauty culture, cafeteria management, dry cleaning, electricity, machine shop, plumbing, radio, sheet metal, tearoom service, and upholstery. Most of these new courses received their own classrooms; for example, the beauty culture courses had an entire working beauty salon. Other new facilities included two tailoring laboratories, dressmaking rooms, a cleaning and pressing shop, as well as shops for automobile mechanics, carpentry, electrical, and sheet metal courses. The planners wisely located the paint shop in a separate small building just off the main facility. They also dedicated an entire wing to the domestic arts, which included a model home complete with a living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom. The new vocational offerings and facilities gave students practical training in areas of employment common for Louisville African-Americans. Unfortunately, the Board continued not offering areas of study common in the white high schools, such as engineering. Fortunately, Central graduates continued to gain entrance into top colleges, including the Ivy League, where such courses of study were available.<sup>274</sup>

The gymnasium and auditorium, not ready for the September opening but completed in time for the school's dedication ceremony in January 1953, lived up to

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<sup>274</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, June 29, 1952; July 11, 1952; "This is Central High School: Louisville's Newest High School," booklet, Jefferson County Public School Archive; Tilford-Weathers, 18.

the African-American community's hopes. The auditorium sat 1,450. This made it the largest performance space available to the blacks in the city. This space also came equipped with additional areas for stagecraft work, like building sets and dressing rooms. The gymnasium could sit an astounding 3,000 people for athletic events and up to 3,647 persons for other events with seating on the gym floor. According to the architect, Robert Nolan, Central High School possessed the largest high school gymnasium in the South. The basketball team's recent national championship made the large scale appropriate. The gymnasium also featured an electronic partition that could separate the gym into separate girls and boys gym spaces for physical education classes.<sup>275</sup>

As for the swimming pool, the city of Louisville initially agreed to pay for half the cost of the natatorium, but the Board declined citing their utter lack of resources. While the city's offer was generous, they simply did not have their half of the \$120,000 project in their budget. As such, this project remained uninitiated at the time of the dedication. However, the architect for the project left space on the campus for the natatorium, so the school could construct the aquatic center when funds became available. Later, because of a partnership between the Jefferson County Recreation Department and the Board of Education, Central's pool became a reality in 1972.<sup>276</sup>

With the completion of the new Central High School campus, the Board followed through on promises long overdue. Alternatively, as the press put it, "An old

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<sup>275</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, June 29, 1952; July 11, 1952; "This is Central High School: Louisville's Newest High School," booklet, Jefferson County Public School Archive,

<sup>276</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, February 23, 1951; Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, March 19, 1951; Tilford-Weathers, 19.



obligation is at last redeemed.” Students and faculty praised the new building to the press, calling it a “dream” and a “beaut.” Principal Atwood Wilson’s primary praise was for the architect’s embrace of the facility requests and plans he sent to the Board back in 1947. Everything he requested came to fruition other than a square front terrace. While the building deserved their praise, a new high school did not equalize African-American education in Louisville. For example, the abysmal facility Central students abandoned for their new campus became a junior high school for African-American students. However, Central High School’s expensive facility served its purpose of assuaging the local black community, thus subverting any possibility of a legal challenge based on the separate but equal doctrine.<sup>277</sup>

## **Conclusion**

While the 1930s and 1940s did not bring major changes to most of Louisville’s public schools, they did witness significant gains for the city’s African-American educators and the larger black community. After seventy years of enduring all forms of discrimination in the public school system, Louisville’s black teachers and principals finally secured a truly equal salary schedule. While the NAACP’s national office did assist that endeavor, it was a grassroots movement whose success was a result of individuals putting their jobs on the line to fight for their civil rights. In similar fashion, a new Central High School facility was not achieved because the Board of Education chose to bestow one upon the black community; that beautiful

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<sup>277</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, February 14, 1951; *The Louisville Defender*, September 16, 1952.

campus resulted from almost two decades of agitation and pressure from Central's administrators, students, and the city's larger black community. While these victories brought progress, they still had more work to do to achieve true parity for black students with the opportunities and facilities for Louisville's white children.

Changes for African-American education in Louisville were coming sooner than many expected. As predicted by Dr. Rufus E. Clement, president of Atlanta University, during his address to the large crowd at Central High School's dedication in January 1953:

We are met in a new, multimillion-dollar high-school plant equipped for the sound education of the children of this great metropolis...May I predict that in the not too distant future this school will serve all the children of this community who reside within this school district?<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, January 17, 1953.

## Chapter 7

### LOUISVILLE'S RESPONSE TO BROWN V. BOARD, 1954-1957

#### Introduction

At Central High School's dedication ceremony in 1953, Dr. Rufus E. Clement predicted that the facility might soon serve white youths as a result of desegregation. His predication proved to be partially true. Desegregation came to Louisville public schools not long after his speech, but there were no white students found in the halls or classrooms of Central.

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that racially segregated schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment, and were therefore unconstitutional. Much of the historical work on the South's reaction to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision focuses on "massive resistance." Those narratives make the story of Louisville's response to the landmark ruling stand out by contrast.

Immediately upon the issuance of the ruling, Louisville's Board of Education announced they would comply with the court's decision. In the following twenty-seven months, the Board met with administrators and teachers to discuss concerns and ideas for implementing desegregation, developed a plan that they then published through the local press, and worked to assign pupils to their new schools. Then, in the fall of 1956, the national media heralded Louisville Public Schools for their successful desegregation and set said desegregation on a pedestal as a model for other southern school systems to follow. However, the level of actual pupil integration was

questionable and the Board's resistance to faculty integration served as reminders that the Board's primary concern was not achieving racial equality, but was instead creating a desegregation plan that was palatable to Louisville's white citizens.

### **Louisville's Response to Brown v. Board of Education**

By the year 1954, the city of Louisville and its Board of Education were familiar with the impact of NAACP lawsuits on education. After the NAACP's successful collaboration with local educators to equalize salaries in 1941, many in Louisville knew it was simply a matter of time before school desegregation fell in the courts. Despite its status as the leading urban center in a Jim Crow state, Louisville's response to the Brown versus Board decision was one of acceptance and compliance. Supported by a lack of resistance from Kentucky state leadership, Louisville's Board of Education immediately launched into preparations for desegregation. Working through the press to promote community input and involvement, the board focused less on fighting racist mores and concentrated on encouraging acceptance of the court decision.

Prior chapters in this work established Louisville's history of being comparatively less oppressive than urban centers in other former slave states. Beginning in the 1950s, a wave of desegregation in the city's public facilities and institutions furthered this reputation. As previously mentioned, in 1950, the University of Louisville admitted students from the local Negro Municipal College to become the first university in the South to enroll black undergraduates and hire an African-American professor. All libraries, public golf courses, and some parks opened to all citizens without regard to race in 1952. In 1954, Louisville's Mayor Andrew

Broaddus declared that all city jobs were open to black applicants and there could no longer be any specification for white or black job candidates. In light of these events, one should view Louisville's desegregation of public schools in 1956 as another desegregation in a larger series of citywide reforms. Without these forerunning events, the desegregation of public schools would likely have met with more resistance.<sup>279</sup>

Virtually all Kentucky and Louisville leadership universally accepted the *Brown* decision. Governor Lawrence Wetherby gave the state government's official opinion, "Kentucky will do whatever is necessary to comply with the law". The state senate conceded that this ruling ended the rule of the Day Law and any other Kentucky law pertaining to separate school facilities for blacks and whites. On June 17, the State Board of Education informed local school boards that they should not make any changes for the upcoming 1954 school year. Kentucky, like eight other states, would be waiting for the Supreme Court's forthcoming decree on implementation. The state board's only African-American member, Albert E. Meyzeek, approved of the decision saying, "I think it is the only thing we can do." Reaction in Louisville was mild at best; Superintendent Omer Carmichael said he only received six letters that protested the Brown decision. According to him, "Our community is already past the shock period."<sup>280</sup>

While the State Board of Education asked that school boards make no changes for the school year beginning in 1954, the local school boards were encouraged to

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<sup>279</sup> Omer Carmichael and Weldon James. *The Louisville Story* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1957).

<sup>280</sup> "Kentucky," *Southern School News*, September 3, 1954; "Opening of Schools Shows Varied Pattern," *Southern School News*, October 1, 1954.

begin exploring their options and prepare for whatever the Supreme Court announced in their follow up decision. The Kentucky Department of Education developed materials schools could use to help communities transition away from segregated schools. One was a bibliography of books, articles, and films they felt were most appropriate for public distribution. The Committee said in the bibliography's introduction, "Without arguing for or against integration, it is believed that when the people are properly informed of the principle involved, they will act in keeping with good faith with that principle." Many of the books included were about the positive contributions African-Americans had made to American society and there were numerous pamphlets about civil rights.<sup>281</sup>

Efforts made in Louisville echoed the state's strategy; the goal was not to end racism but to encourage acceptance of the court order. To that end, Superintendent Carmichael and his staff began their preparation efforts by meeting with school leadership to discuss the issue of desegregation in the summer of 1954. At these meetings, they asked principals about their concerns and ideas and then instructed that once school began in the fall they were to have a meeting with their faculties to discuss the general issue. Each school was to produce a list of questions and concerns they would like the school board to consider in creating a citywide school

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<sup>281</sup> "Question of Integration: A Bibliography," Commonwealth of Kentucky Education Bulletin, July 1955, Omer Carmichael Papers, Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY (hereafter cited as Carmichael Papers).

desegregation plan. These lists were to be in to Carmichael's office by January 1955.<sup>282</sup>

In the meantime, the school board members received some concerned letters from parents but no hate mail or threats, with one notable exception in October 1954. The "We the People" letter, as they referred to it internally, was a three-page letter signed anonymously with "We the People". The author addressed the letter to board member Yancy Altsheler and claimed to speak on behalf of the parents of local schoolchildren. The letter claimed "every ho-bo on that court should be shot for treason" and that the Brown decision was "un-Christian, un American [sic] and unconstitutional". After a series of other threats, the letter closed with, "This is just to remind you to get ready. Its separate schools or race War [sic] take your choice." An investigation by the FBI failed to identify the author of the letter but the threats turned out to be empty. Perhaps in an effort to underplay controversy, the board never released the "We the People" letter to the press.<sup>283</sup>

Perhaps in response to the "We the People" letter, or more likely the belief that others in the community shared some of its sentiments, the school board focused its attention on public opinion. From January to May of 1955, they scheduled public meetings throughout the city to raise awareness about the court's decision as well as give concerned community members a forum to ask questions. Carmichael and his staff attending meetings hosted by Parent Teacher Associations, churches, women's

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<sup>282</sup> Omer Carmichael, "Memo on Desegregation," September 12, 1956, Carmichael Papers.

<sup>283</sup> Unknown. "We the People," letter, Yancy Altsheler Papers, University of Louisville Archive.

clubs, and civic groups. The meetings usually had no less than 50 people in attendance and no more than 500. Meetings included a presentation by the school system representative followed by a question and answer period. Carmichael recalled, “Some idea of the spirit of our people may be gained from the fact that in [the] fifty or sixty meetings which I addressed...I never received a single aggressive or unpleasant question.”<sup>284</sup>

During one of these public meetings in April 1955, Morton Walker, the President of the Louisville Board of Education, announced that a desegregated system would likely be in place by the fall of 1956, but that a change could take place sooner depending on the Supreme Court. Speaking to members of the Urban League Guild at Zion Baptist Church he expressed, “When we go (to integration) we want to be sure we will be ready.” When the Supreme Court announced the *Brown II* decision (as it is known) on May 31, 1955, many advocates for a deadline for all schools to desegregate were left disappointed. The court left the implementation of the change to local school boards and the language “with all deliberate speed” would plague school desegregation for years to come. It would not be so in Louisville. True to Walker’s word, the day after the decision he made a formal announcement that some form of desegregation would commence in September 1956. Some complained that desegregation should take place in the fall of 1955 since there were still three months to prepare. Carmichael publically responded that a year of preparation was more than a prompt and reasonable start toward ending desegregation. James A. Crumlin, President of the Kentucky NAACP announced that same day that while they were

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<sup>284</sup> Omer Carmichael, “Memo on Desegregation” September 12, 1956, Carmichael Papers.



disappointed, if assurance was given that desegregation would commence the following school year that his group would not take any legal action to force it sooner.<sup>285</sup>

Elsewhere in Kentucky, other school districts began preparations for their own school desegregations. The Jefferson County school district, in the growing suburbs surrounding Louisville, also began to prepare for desegregation. However, because the county had a relatively small number of African-American students, desegregation would not be a major logistical hurdle. Upon the release of the *Brown II* decision, their school board announced that work would begin to desegregate Jefferson County schools the following fall of 1956, thus coordinating the city and county desegregations. While Louisville and Jefferson County were making plans for the 1956-1957 school year, Kentucky's first desegregation post-*Brown* took place at the Griffin School in Wayne County in the fall of 1955. Six students, ranging in age from six to fifteen, attended the previously all-white school.<sup>286</sup>

Getting back to the city, in response to *Brown II*, the Louisville School Board immediately commissioned Superintendent Carmichael and his staff to create a plan to be presented to the board as soon as was feasible. While the school board was busy developing a plan, the only other significant progress toward school desegregation was when the Louisville Education Association voted on September 29, 1955, to admit the

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<sup>285</sup> "School Integration Here Seen in '56," *The Louisville Times*, April 18, 1955; "September, '56, is Still Integration Target Here," *The Louisville Times* June 1 1955.

<sup>286</sup> "Kentucky," *Southern School News*, June 8, 1955; Edwina Ann Doyle, ed., *From the Fort to the Future: Educating the Children of Kentucky* (Lexington: Kentucky Images, 1987) 369.

almost 400 black teachers in the school system to their membership of 1500 white teachers. While the merging of school faculty was not likely to be included in the initial desegregation plan, this was certainly a step in the right direction. Elsewhere in Kentucky, school desegregation made little progress because of a bitter gubernatorial race and the choice of many school boards to wait on a set of broad principles under development by the state's Department of Education. Yet, a few small districts with few or no African-Americans did officially desegregate in the fall of 1955 but most school districts with more diverse populations followed Louisville's lead to desegregate in the fall of 1956.<sup>287</sup>

On November 22, 1955, the local press published the school board's tentative plan for desegregation. The plan was simple, containing twelve provisions. To avoid quoting the entire plan, here are reduced forms of the provisions:

- 1) The program shall go into operation in September 1956.
- 2) The change would affect the entire district at all levels, kindergarten through adult classes.
- 3) The entire area of the Louisville School District will be redistricted without regard to race.

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<sup>287</sup> "Kentucky," *Southern School News*, June 8, 1955; Doyle, 369; "Louisville Education Association Votes to Admit Negro Teachers," *The Courier-Journal*, September 30, 1955; "Limited Integration in Ten Kentucky Counties, Four Cities," *Southern School News*, September 1955.

- 4) In redistricting, there will be no gerrymandering or other unnatural boundaries.
- 5) Redistricting for schools will stress convenience for students and building capacities.
- 6) Each school would serve all students in their assigned area, regardless of race, with an emphasis on avoiding excessive travel for any student.
- 7) If two schools are so close to one another that sharing an area is reasonable, parents may choose which school their child will attend.
- 8) Parents will be informed in writing of which school their child has been assigned to attend.
- 9) If the school district in which a student belongs under the new districting is now serving the other race, they may attend their new school or the parent may request transfer for them to some other school now serving their own race.
- 10) Transfers will not be granted to schools where they would crowd out students who are originally assigned to that school.
- 11) A student may be sent back to the school serving their area if their grades or conduct is unsatisfactory.

12) Students attending a school outside of their assigned area may be able not receive free transportation to their transfer school, but exceptions are possible. 288

Carmichael and the school board openly welcomed feedback on the plan. A skeptic could look at these provisions and find a variety of issues that could hinder desegregation. Yet, the board did not seek to subvert desegregation efforts but stated openly that they wanted African-American opinion to be part of the plan's development. Carmichael once said, "It is our purpose in Louisville to develop as democratically and cooperatively as we can a program which will not be something developed by the white people for the Negro people but developed by the two groups working together". Over the next 30 days, the only proposed change to the original provisions, beside some minor technical additions, was to alter the racial language concerning school transfers. The board then changed Item 9 to "A parent who prefers another school may request a transfer." Once they drafted this more neutral language, the Louisville School Board voted unanimously that December to adopt the plan and put it into operation in the fall of 1956. As expected, this desegregation plan made no provisions for desegregating teachers.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> "Desegregation Plan for City Provides for Redistricting 'Without Regard to Race,'" *The Courier-Journal*, November 22, 1955.

<sup>289</sup> "Questionnaire on Desegregation for City School Systems on Southern and Border States," from the Board of Education of Nashville, Tennessee, June 15, 1955, Carmichael Papers; Original copy of student assignment card, Carmichael Papers; Omer Carmichael, "Memo on Desegregation," Carmichael Papers.

In January and February 1956, families received a postcard indicating to which new school district the board assigned their children. A copy of the board's desegregation plan, increasingly referred to as a "free choice" plan, also appeared on the card. Parents had the option of accepting the original placement or they could indicate their first, second, and third choice for a transfer to a school they preferred their student to attend. The form did not require parents to provide a reason for their transfer request. All requests for a transfer had to be in by March. The board sent a final letter to all families in May, giving final school assignments and thanking parents for their understanding and cooperation. The board's plan was somewhat risky since, if enough families requested transfers, there was the possibility that little or no desegregation would take place.<sup>290</sup>

Fortunately, out of over 45,000 students, there were only 2712 transfer requests (a little more than 5%); both white and black families requested transfers. The board granted all but 257 transfer requests, denials generally the result of a school being at capacity. While only a small overall percentage of parents requested a transfer for their child, the school board released numbers indicating that the transfers were racially motivated. In cases where a white child received an assignment to a formerly black school, a transfer was requested 80% of the time. When a black child was placed in a school that had been historically been a white school, 50% of these

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<sup>290</sup> "11 More Kentucky Districts Announce Plans to Desegregate," *Southern School News*, April 1956; Copy of original postcard and letter, Carmichael Papers; Omer Carmichael, "Memo on Desegregation," Carmichael Papers.

parents requested a transfer. These numbers concerned many in the community who feared little racial mixing would actually take place.<sup>291</sup>

While the free choice plan did accommodate parents seeking transfers based on race-related motives, the school board recognized they needed to prepare students for the transition. In a cooperative effort between Louisville and Jefferson County, they developed a curriculum to allow teachers in the spring of 1956 to prepare students for the coming fall desegregation. Developed by two local teachers, there were different plans for primary and high schools. The primary school curriculum lasted for ten weeks. During the first week, teachers presented one lesson each day that focused on various aspects of Africa. Topics included facts about the continent, the way people there lived, worked, their families lives, and so on. The teacher had to create lessons that were appropriate for primary school children since she was reportedly unable to find any such lessons in existence. Over the next five weeks, the students received lessons about famous African-Americans, like Frederick Douglas, and their contributions to American life and society. The final four weeks focused on developing “brotherhood” which emphasized the moral values of fairness and treating others with respect.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> “11 More Kentucky Districts Announce Plans to Desegregate,” *Southern School News*, April 1956; Copy of original postcard and letter, Carmichael Papers; Omer Carmichael, “Memo on Desegregation,” Carmichael Papers; “School Survey Prompts ‘Limited Integration,’” *The Louisville Defender*, April 5, 1956; “Louisville, Ky. Completes Plans for School Desegregation,” *Southern School News*, May 1956.

<sup>292</sup> Mary Elizabeth Reuter and Lucian Adams, “Introductions to Integration,” (Louisville: Louisville and Jefferson County Departments of Education, 1956), pamphlet, Carmichael Papers.

The curriculum for high school students was simpler, but certainly interesting. Students, both black and white, took a survey containing questions like: Do you consider yourself a prejudiced person? Would you dance with someone of another race? Would you invite a student of another race to a party? They intended the survey to help students understand their own prejudices and be able to discuss them openly in the presence of a teacher. Most schools also had assemblies to help students understand what changes would be taking place in the upcoming school year and what was expected of them behaviorally.<sup>293</sup>

When school let out for the summer, the era of segregation in Louisville schools came to an official close. After over two years of preparation, the first test of desegregation in Louisville schools came sooner than some expected. On June 11, 1956, a dozen African-American students walked into summer school at the formerly white DuPont Manual High School. The school board had made the decision to allow all students to attend the summer school, which requires students to pay tuition and was not necessarily remedial, since they felt the community was ready. Many considered this a test run for the fall desegregation. The six-week summer program was free of any incidents and received positive press in the local media. Theresa and Doris Fresh, two African-American sisters, attended the summer school in an effort to

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<sup>293</sup> Omer Carmichael, "Preparation for Desegregation in the Public Schools of Louisville, Kentucky," speech delivered at the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials on November 28, 1956, Carmichael Papers.

graduate from high school early. Doris reported on school desegregation, “I think I’m going to like it because they’re all friendly.”<sup>294</sup>

The end of the summer of 1956 brought with it another litmus test for the upcoming city system desegregation. On August 28, Male High School had its first football practice and eight African-Americans (incoming tenth graders) were among the 100 students participating in the scrimmage. There were no incidents of racial tension or related problems. Another big sign of encouragement as the city prepared for the fall’s desegregation was the lack of flight from public schools. In fact, Louisville Public Schools actually increased their enrollment for the fall of 1956 by more than 1000 students for a record total of 42,000.<sup>295</sup>

By all indications, Louisville was ready for its most significant desegregation to date. The Board of Education’s immediate announcement of their compliance with the court’s decision made it clear to the community that resistance would not be on their agenda. By focusing on encouraging obedience with the court’s orders to desegregate and accommodating families opposed to the order, no viable movement against school desegregation developed. The board’s meetings and discussions with faculty and administrators, along with the curriculums designed to help students understand the coming desegregation, meant that those inside school walls felt prepared for the coming changes. While the city felt equipped to handle the coming

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<sup>294</sup> “Manual High School Accepts Negro Students for First Time,” *The Louisville Defender*, June 14, 1956; “Louisville, Kentucky’s Largest School District, Gets Its First Negros,” *Southern School News*, July 1956.

<sup>295</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, August 29, 1956; September 7, 1956.



desegregation, the Board of Education knew only time would tell if the transition would be a success and if any meaningful desegregation would take place.

### **Louisville's "Successful" Desegregation**

Despite some mild, last-minute resistance, Louisville's desegregation in the fall of 1956 went off without a hitch. The community's months of preparation resulted in an uneventful opening day. To the surprise of many, despite the availability of transfers the vast majority of Louisville's students attended mixed race schools that school year. This "successful" desegregation brought accolades and press attention for Louisville's leadership, with the city praised as a model for other southerners to follow. However, the issue of teacher desegregation dampened those proceedings, indicating that Louisville still had work to do in order to achieve equality in education.

As the new school year approached, some resistance to segregation did emerge in the community. Citizens Councils had begun to spring up around the South to resist desegregation. There was a chapter in Kentucky and their labors comprised the only organized efforts to stop school desegregation in Louisville. In August 1956, a delegation of 20 presented a petition to the school board claiming that the Day Law was still in effect and that the Supreme Court had no authority in the matter. They promised to picket schools, especially Louisville Male High School, which had hitherto been the city's most prestigious white high school. The Board of Education cautioned the Citizens Council that they were only making things harder for

themselves and others. As the petition had only 80 signatures, it had little impact on the board or the community.<sup>296</sup>

Despite his confidence that desegregation would run smoothly, Superintendent Carmichael made sure to prepare for the first day of school on September 10, 1956. The Louisville Police posted officers at the schools with a special presence at Male High School. Out of about 1000 students at the school, over 50 African-American students would be attending the high school. On opening day, Carmichael, Mayor Broaddus, other officials, and the press waited outside Louisville Male High School to await the historic first bell. Despite threats made by the Citizens Council, there was no trouble. Four members decided to picket outside of City Hall, and not one of them was the parent of a Louisville schoolchild.<sup>297</sup>

With the adults calm, how did the students respond? Carmichael recalled:

The first pupils came singly or in small groups, some laughing and gay, some solemn, alert or inquisitive. Most of them went promptly into the building but a few lingered outside. The throng remaining outside was not much larger than would be expected on the first day of school. The one big difference was that some were Negroes, some were white...the group was well behaved. [When] the warning bell rang...all the students

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<sup>296</sup> “Kentucky to Have ‘Integrated Situations’ in All but 15 Counties,” *Southern School News*, September 1956; “To the Bitter End,” *The Louisville Defender*, September 30, 1956.

<sup>297</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 11, 1956.

went into the building as on any other opening day. It was a good beginning.<sup>298</sup>

Schools throughout the city also experienced a calm opening day, with no racially charged incidents reported. While the first day may have gone smoothly, that was not the only test of whether the desegregation had been successful. Many in the city had been concerned that the accommodations given in the “free choice” plan would result in little or no racial mixing in the schools. As of October 4, 1956, Louisville’s public school enrollment included 33,831 white and 12,831 black pupils, with 73.6% of students in racially mixed schools. As defined by the school board and press at the time, “racially mixed” simply meant there was at least one white student at an otherwise black school and vice versa. All-white student bodies contributed 12.5% and all-black student bodies stood at 13.9%. In the high schools, 79.7% were in five mixed schools. There were no all white high schools, but Central High remained all African-American. Central High School, as the newest school in Louisville with a track record of athletic championships and students winning thousands of scholarship dollars for college, remained the crown jewel of the city’s black community. All but a handful of Central students who fell under another school assignment district had requested transfers back to Central. About 100 black students chose to attend one of the other five high schools, but all these students were incoming high schoolers who had never attended Central. The thirteen junior high schools had 73.8% racial integration. There were nine mixed schools, one all-white school, and three all-black

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<sup>298</sup> Omer Carmichael and Weldon James. *The Louisville Story* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1957).

junior highs. Fifty-one out of sixty-six elementary schools achieved racial mixing, with 10 all-white schools and five all-black schools. Most in the community were delighted since many feared that housing patterns, when combined with the “free choice” plan, would lead to far fewer mixed race schools.<sup>299</sup>

While things were going well in Louisville, and most school districts in Kentucky, the state was not free of controversy surrounding desegregation that fall. Mob action in desegregating Clay and Sturgis counties resulted in intervention by the Kentucky National Guard. As a result, the attorney general ruled to remove black students from the schools. While the Citizens Council had failed to thwart efforts in Louisville, they had found success in Clay and Sturgis.<sup>300</sup>

Due, perhaps, in part to the upheaval in those cities and in other southern states that fall, Louisville quickly became the press’s model for desegregation in the South and Superintendent Omer Carmichael was their poster child. Both mainstream and local media outlets praised Louisville and its school board. President Eisenhower, alerted by the media attention, even extended a personal invitation for Carmichael to join him in the White House on September 20, 1956, for what turned out to be a forty-

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<sup>299</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, October 22, 1956, Jefferson County Public School Archive, Louisville, KY; “Kentucky Reports Mixed Classes in 232 Schools,” *Southern School News*, November 1956; Omer Carmichael, “Preparation for Desegregation in the Public Schools of Louisville, Kentucky,” speech delivered at the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials on November 28, 1956, Carmichael Papers; “Central Graduates Get \$56,700 In Scholarships,” *The Louisville Defender*, June 7, 1956.

<sup>300</sup> “Kentucky,” *Southern School News*, October 1956.

five minute conversation. Later that month, Vice President Nixon visited Louisville and praised the city for its desegregation in his speech to the local Rotary Club.<sup>301</sup>

After these high profile events, the publicity surrounding Louisville's school desegregation increased significantly. U.S. News and World Report published a 16-page interview with Carmichael in October, the New York Times Magazine ran a front-page story on Louisville, and a LIFE Magazine article contrasted pictures of resistance throughout the South with pictures of happy children from both races playing outside of a Louisville school.<sup>302</sup> Carmichael also served as a guest on national television and radio programs in the following weeks. He served as a guest on NBC's *Today* show the three times and appeared on *Face the Nation*. He gave an eight-minute address on *Voice of America* that they broadcast around the world. Through all of these appearances, Carmichael continued to emphasize that the key to a successful desegregation was leadership at the local level, not federal intervention, and the importance of preparing the students and the community.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> "Careful Plans, Calm Change," *Life Magazine*, September 24, 1956; "Nixon Praises Ike's Record, Ky.'s Integration," *The Louisville Defender*, October 4, 1956; "Louisville Public School Honored," Newsletter of the Office of the Superintendent of Schools, Louisville, Kentucky, October 15, 1956, Carmichael Papers.

<sup>302</sup> "Is Voluntary Integration the Answer? Interview with Louisville's School Superintendent Dr. Omer Carmichael," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 5, 1956; "The Louisville Story-Told by Carmichael," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 1956.

<sup>303</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, September 24, 1956; "Louisville Public School Honored" Newsletter of the Office of the Superintendent of Schools, Louisville, Kentucky, October 15, 1956, Carmichael Papers.

Carmichael also received accolades from academia. By the end of the summer of the summer of 1957, he would receive honorary degrees from Harvard University, Yale University, Dartmouth College, and the University of Kentucky. In response to all the positive press and requests for more information on how Louisville planned and executed their school desegregation, Carmichael co-wrote *The Louisville Story*, a book recounting his experience, that Simon & Shuster published in 1957.<sup>304</sup>

The only less-than-glowing press assessment of Louisville's school desegregation came from The Louisville Defender, a weekly paper that served the city's African-American audience. The writer praised Carmichael's leadership, his decision to keep the press and community informed throughout the two year planning and implementation of school desegregation, and pointed out how smoothly desegregation went in Louisville compared to the drama in Clay and Sturgis. However, while Louisville's officials and citizens deserved praise, the writer also highlighted two key failures. One, that "less than 10% of the Negro children are integrated in Louisville schools". Where this statistic came from is unknown, but it certainly stands in stark contrast with the numbers released by the school board saying that less than 14% of African-Americans were in all-black schools. Two, he pointed to the lack of teacher desegregation. The issue of desegregating Louisville school faculties remained a reoccurring battle for the next decade.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, June 10 1957; Omer Carmichael and Weldon James. *The Louisville Story* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1957).

<sup>305</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, October 1, 1956; October 22, 1956; "Sharing the Credit," *The Louisville Defender*, September 20, 1956.

Despite the mixed response from The Louisville Defender, the October 1956 Louisville School board meeting proved to be a triumphant one for Carmichael. The majority of the business covered the status of desegregation of the schools, the desegregation's success, and various aspects of his press tour. In his official report, Carmichael gave eight reasons for their successful desegregation:

- 1) The local media's unwavering support and responsible handling of an issue that was potentially explosive
- 2) Clearest possible acceptance of the decision of the Court as the law of the land by the superintendent and the board
- 3) A definite statement of the purpose to observe the law
- 4) Careful preparation for the change by faculties, pupils, and community
- 5) A simple, easily understood plan
- 6) Complete integrity in the administration of the plan
- 7) Completion of the redistricting and reassignment of pupils months before the change
- 8) Fundamental respect of our people for the law<sup>306</sup>

Despite all the success and praise, there was one major issue of contention: the Board's resistance to integrating white and black educators. While there was some

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discussion of the issue in the planning phases from 1954 to 1956, Carmichael told the public that they were taking things one step at a time and teacher desegregation would have to wait. He did try to assure African-American teachers that they would not lose their jobs. When a few formerly black schools closed as a result of the desegregation plan, those teachers and employees were transferred to predominantly black schools. This issue was mostly on the public's mental backburner until Carmichael, while enjoying his positive run with the national press, told the *U.S. News and World Report* in early October 1956 that he believed black teachers were not as qualified as white teachers. He went as far to say, "The average white teacher is considerably superior to the average Negro teacher in competence as a person to teach children." As if that was not enough, he further insulted Louisville's black community stating, "How can a person come out of a slummy, crime-ridden area of the city, with poor churches and few things that go to enrich life—how can a person come out of such background the equal of one who comes out of a more cultured home in a more cultured community, etc.?"<sup>307</sup>

This set off a local firestorm that tarnished Carmichael's reputation among African-Americans. As the *Louisville Defender* asked, "Does Mr. Carmichael himself feel that Negro teachers are inferior to whites?" Many quickly pointed out that the data showed that black teachers in Kentucky were generally superior to their white counterparts in education and experience. In response, Carmichael answered that black

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<sup>307</sup> Omer Carmichael and Weldon James. *The Louisville Story* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1957). "Is Voluntary Integration the Answer? Interview with Louisville's School Superintendent Dr. Omer Carmichael," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 5, 1956.



colleges were inferior to white institutions, despite SACS ratings to the contrary, and that black teachers were psychologically not fit to teach white children. Critics questioned his decision to make these statements publically, since they would surely only increase resistance to the eventual desegregation of faculty.<sup>308</sup>

At the end of October 1956, a teacher at Central High School arranged for Carmichael to address a group of about 300 teachers to give an official response to the growing criticism over his *U.S. News and World Report* interview. Carmichael's response was interesting. He did not actually refute his comments but said that his opinions were not specific to Louisville's black teachers or black community but were a composite of what he had seen in various southern schools districts. Carmichael's seeming intent when he met with this group of teachers was not to apologize but to admit that he made mistakes and did not want this issue to halt the school system's progress. In terms of brass tacks issues, Carmichael did seek to reassure African-American teachers of their job security: "No Negro teacher will, with my recommendation, lose his job over the desegregation question." For the sake of comparison, about sixty African-American teachers in Kentucky lost their jobs that fall due to desegregation, while none were let go in Louisville. Despite his conciliatory posturing at this meeting and promises that the Board would begin discussing options for mixed race faculties, Carmichael did nothing to further the desegregation of schoolteachers or administrators at that time.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> "Criticism Not Enough," *The Louisville Defender*, October 04, 1956; "Carmichael's Repeated Attacks," *The Louisville Defender*, October 18, 1956.

<sup>309</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, October 31, 1956; October 14, 1956.

Given the relatively positive outcome of the desegregation of students, it is important to remember that a lack of opposition is not the same as public support. While the September 1956 transition to a desegregated system went off with few hitches, a January 1957 report indicated that a slight majority of adults in Louisville still opposed desegregation. This survey, taken four months after the desegregation of the schools was complete, presented these findings:

16% fully approved of the policy of school desegregation

30% accepted the change as something that was right, inevitable, and/or sensible

7% didn't care one way or the other

23% accepted the policy as an accomplished fact, although they disapproved of it on principle

24% disapproved completely, and proposed an attempt to change back to the old policy<sup>310</sup>

The study showed that factors like wealth and education were significant; the more education and wealth they had the more likely they were to approve of desegregation. Interestingly, whether or not the person surveyed had a child in the Louisville school system had no significant impact on their position. These numbers, showing only 16% embracing the change with 47% disapproving on some level,

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<sup>310</sup> Kemper and Associates Industrial Consultants, "A Survey of the Opinions of Adult Louisvillians Toward the Policy of Racial Desegregation in the Louisville Public School," January 23, 1957, Carmichael Papers.

provide an argument for both accommodation and acceptance. Since such a high number disapproved, their lack of collective public opposition leads one to believe that the Board of Education accommodated them with the option to have students attend a school more in line with their sensibilities. With 74% accepting the change, either on principle or in fact, the long process of acclimating the community to school desegregation was a shrewd effort. As Yancy Altsheler said in a 1972 interview, the keys to the desegregation's success were not so much support for the plan but a lack of public opposition. Despite the private opinions of some dissenting whites, Altsheler concluded, "I felt we had civic pride in being the first large city in the South to integrate."<sup>311</sup>

With the city's first school year of student desegregation heralded as a success, local African-American leaders saw no reason why teacher desegregation could not begin in the fall of 1957. The Louisville branch of the NAACP submitted a formal letter to the school board in July, which they then presented at the Board's August 5 meeting. They conceded that the Supreme Court's decision in the *Brown* case was to do with students, but they felt "sure the board recognizes that its rigid policy and practice of teacher segregation is just as illegal and immoral as pupil segregation". Carmichael's response was vague and showed no movement on this issue. He said the desegregation of faculties "introduces a number of problems which are not introduced

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<sup>311</sup> Carl Ryant, "Interview with Yancy Altsheler," unpublished document, Yancy Altsheler papers, University of Louisville.

by [the] desegregation of pupils”. He then went on to say he wanted another school year to focus solely on the issue of student desegregation.<sup>312</sup>

One wonders, to what problems was Carmichael referring? Perhaps it was his perception that Louisville’s white school parents were willing to tolerate the presence of a black student in their child’s classroom (assuming those black students remained a clear minority), but that they would not be accepting of an African-American at the front of that classroom teaching their child. Carmichael’s numerous statements about the inferiority of African-American educators supported this possibility. Regardless of his meaning, there is no record that the board even discussed the issue before approving Carmichael’s recommendation to shelve the question of teacher desegregation. In fact, teacher desegregation did not take place until the 1959-1960 school year. Once enacted, the number of African-American teachers in Louisville schools immediately began a steady decline as the Board of Education hired more white teachers than black teachers in the following decades at a ratio of one black teacher hire to every seventy-six white teacher hires.<sup>313</sup>

The Louisville school board’s fall 1957 desegregation report proved that their student desegregation plan’s first year successes were not a fluke. Total enrollment in the school system only rose by 200 students, yet 2,000 more were attending mixed

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<sup>312</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, August 5, 1957; *The Courier-Journal*, August 6, 1957.

<sup>313</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, August 5, 1957; *The Courier-Journal*, August 6, 1957; John Egerton, *The Louisville Story—1970* (Nashville, Race Relationship Information Center, 1970); Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, *Black Teachers Lose Employment Ground, 1954-1984 : Officials Employed One Additional Black Teacher for Every 76 Additional White Teachers* (Louisville: Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, 1985).

race schools. The percentage of students in desegregated schools increased to 78.2%, versus 73.6% the year before. There were no longer any all-white junior highs and all-black junior highs had been reduced from 3 to 2. There was also one less all-white elementary school (down to 9) while all-black elementary schools held steady at 5. The only progress in the wrong direction seemed to be at the high school level. Central High School continued to be an all-black institution, while Atherton High (categorized as mixed race in 1956 due to the presence of two African-American students) had reverted to again being an all-white school within a year.<sup>314</sup>

While the Board still needed to address the issue of teacher desegregation, most of Louisville's residents, black and white, began to move beyond school desegregation to other civil rights issues at the turn of the decade. Evaluating the success of Louisville's 1956 school desegregation, a major hurdle for racial equality all around the United States, would seem to be a story of the right city, at the right time, with the right plan. Louisville citizens' general acceptance of prior desegregations in the city and the school board's history of abiding by the law were keys to this achievement. These predispositions, when combined with a well-organized roll out of a feasible desegregation plan, all but assured a generally positive outcome. As to whether the success was a product of acceptance or accommodation, it would seem that both conclusions would have truth in them: those that accepted Louisville's school desegregation were able to do so with no social stigma and the Board of Education accommodated those who did not accept the Brown decision.

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<sup>314</sup> Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, Meeting Minutes, October 7, 1957.

## Conclusion

The story of African-American public schools has primarily been a story of a community that fought to create and improve educational opportunities for their children. They did not need to wait for help from benevolent northern whites to bring them education, but instead took advantage of the lack of legal barriers to creating educational opportunities for their children beginning in the 1840s. This same community used their political leverage to gain public schools for their children, including access to white tax dollars to strengthen their schools, in the 1870s. Even when electoral changes made it difficult for the black community to force the hands of the schoolboard, they persisted in fighting inequitable bond issues and unequal course offerings. Once the community's political clout returned via competitive party politics in the 1930s, they made quick work of equalizing teacher salaries and eventually got a new school campus for Central High School.

The agency of Louisville's African-American community and their ability to fight for their children's education is unique among black communities in the former slave states. This makes the 1956 desegregation of Louisville's public schools all the more interesting because it was not a result of community agitation. Superintendent Carmichael and the Board of Education of Louisville, Kentucky, chose to implement the *Brown* and *Brown II* decisions in a timely fashion. As such, local black leadership only confirmed they would not take school leadership to court to force an earlier desegregation. The black community played no role in forcing Louisville's Board of Education to desegregate.

In fact, not all of Louisville's African-Americans welcomed desegregation. As previously mentioned, 50% of African-American students chose to transfer from a

white school into a black school when they received their placements for the fall of 1956. It is also important to note that all of Central High School's students opted to return to their school; only 100 new, incoming high school students opted to keep their assignments to the city's formerly white high schools. Many in the black community also voiced serious concern over what impact desegregation would have on black faculty and administrators. While it is possible that Louisville's African-American citizens would have fought the city to desegregate schools if the Board of Education resisted to do so of their own volition, it is entirely possible that they would have preferred to remain segregated as long as the Board truly equalized funding, facilities, and coursework under the segregated system.

While the 1956 desegregation of schools was not a result of agitation by the city's African-American community, what does feel familiar to the larger narrative is how schoolboard leadership publically touted all the good they believed they did for their African-American students. However, the controversy surrounding the desegregation of faculty also tells the familiar tale of a city that preferred praise and accolades to establishing true racial equality in its schools.

From the beginning of African-American public schools in 1870, Louisville's leadership highlighted the many opportunities they bestowed on the black community through the school system. However, the occasional fine schoolhouse never compensated for the growing number of facilities that failed to meet muster; the improved facilities for teaching chauffeuring never compensated for the lack of an engineering curriculum. As inequality for African-American education in Louisville increased over the years, accelerated at times by losses in political influence for the city's black voters, calls for improvements met with reminders of how much better

they had it than other communities of color. Nowhere did the Board of Education more clearly articulate this sentiment than in the African-American faculty's struggle for pay equity. While the Board's claims of superiority in opportunity were accurate, the black community never stopped fighting for improvements with equality as their end goal. Thankfully, the resurgence in relevancy for the city's black voters resulted in positive progress for black schools, such as the fulfillment of promises to build a new Central High School facility, all of which culminated in the desegregation of 1956. While Superintendent Carmichael received the press attention, Louisville's African-American community deserved the credit for the quality of their children's education.