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In September 2007, the city of Little Rock — and the entire country — commemorated a crisis of public school integration and race relations that occurred fifty years ago at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The following is one of six essays which are products of the Ben J. Altheimer Symposium on the 50th Anniversary of the Central High Crisis, held at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Bowen School of Law on September 20 and 21, 2007. Symposium speakers and participants included nationally-renowned civil rights activists, members of the local judiciary, and local leaders involved both fifty years ago and today in working toward equality between all races and ethnicities.
HISTORY OF THE ALTERNATIVE DESEGREGATION PLAN AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY’S PERSPECTIVE AND REACTION

Johanna Miller Lewis*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the traditional tale of the Little Rock crisis, a “racially progressive” southern city embraced the Brown v. Board of Education decision and prepared a court-approved school integration plan, only to be blindsided by Governor Orval Faubus when he called out the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the integration of Central High School. To make matters worse, when nine African American teenagers attempted to enter the high school through a hostile crowd of segregationists on September 4, 1957, and the Guard turned them back, the national press corps preserved the entire episode for posterity in newspapers, on radio, and on television.

Little Rock, Arkansas, became world famous as an intolerant place. Governor Faubus didn’t seem to mind, however. Even after meeting with President Eisenhower to negotiate a solution to the standoff, Faubus kept the state militia in place and the nine black students out of Central High until Judge Ronald Davies ordered him to stop using the Guard for that purpose. Faubus complied, and when the Little Rock Nine entered Central High through a side door on September 23 the crowd outside of the school almost rioted until the police removed the black students from the school. Finally, on September 24 President Dwight D. Eisenhower ended the stalemate and upheld the United States Constitution when he ordered the United States Army’s renowned 101st Airborne Division to escort the now-famous Little Rock Nine through the front doors of Central High School the next day.

This essay will (1) discuss the black community’s perspective on the Little Rock School Board’s attempt to formulate a successful desegregation plan and (2) suggest that had the white majority listened to the black community things might have been different.

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II. HISTORY OF THE ALTERNATIVE DESEGREGATION PLAN

Throughout the summer of 1954 Associated Press reporter Bem Price traveled around the South to watch the beginning of the end of legalized segregation. He observed that even among the Negro "little people" the Brown decision had provided them with "hope that segregation, the legal badge of inferiority, was on its way out." But what those "little people" understood that most white Southerners did not was that the Supreme Court's mandate for desegregation was just one legal method to correct a terrible social problem.²

After the Brown decision, Little Rock dismantled segregation in a number of public facilities. However, being able to drink out of the same water fountain as white people—when you could not use the dressing room or restaurant in the same department store—did not add up to racial progress for African Americans, especially when most venues around the city continued to be segregated.³ Neither did checking books out of the local library, or sitting at the front of the bus, or integrating a handful of African Americans into three majority white school districts outside of central Arkansas.

More importantly, almost all of the advances that Arkansas made toward desegregation had occurred without any meaningful participation of African Americans. The white power structure—in local school boards and town councils, the state department of education, the governorship, the legislature, and even churches—continued to act unilaterally in what they undoubtedly considered to be "the best interest of Negroes"—without actually consulting or empowering them. Consequently, when the white majority witnessed the peaceful end of segregation in some of Little Rock's public facilities and then saw the school board work on plans to integrate public schools, they assumed that education would be no different.

Unlike Little Rock's white population, the black population had spent six decades living with the reality that separate was not equal. The well-known comparison between Little Rock's Central High School and segregated Dunbar High School (the first negro high school in Arkansas to gain accreditation) clearly showed that black taxpayers helped pay $1.5 million for "the most beautiful high school in America," complete with more classrooms, laboratories, an outdoor stadium, a larger library, and well paid faculty and administrators, while their own children attended a junior high school, high school, and junior college combined in one smaller building that cost $400,000 (most of which was raised from private sources) and had

fewer classrooms, a more basic curriculum, a smaller library, no stadium or
gymnasium, and less well paid teachers and administrators.

Little Rock’s black leaders, especially those actively involved in civil
rights and education, also knew of the huge cost and heroic effort behind the
Brown victory. As African Americans born in the Jim Crow South, they
realized that such a difficult court battle meant that the “real life” war to
desegregate schools could be even more costly. Consequently, in the three
years before Central desegregated, the NAACP in Little Rock and Arkansas
tried repeatedly to help Blossom and the school board create a plan and a
strategy that would withstand the segregationist onslaught, only to be ig-
nored and rebuffed—with disastrous results for Little Rock.

On May 21, 1954, L.C. Bates editorialized about the possibilities
wrought by the Brown decision in the Arkansas State Press, the state-wide
African American newspaper with the largest circulation. Bates admitted he
was not overly optimistic that school integration would happen without a
challenge from white Southerners, but he did believe that the white children
of the South accepted the idea more than their elders. The editorial ended by
calling “for the leaders from the Negro race—leaders, not clabber mouths,
Uncle Toms, or grinning appeasers—to get together and counsel with the
school heads and try to get some relief from the school ills.” He believed
that such cooperation would save not only time, money, and emotion but the
possibility of violence, also.  

That evening Bates attended a meeting of Little Rock’s African Ameri-
can leaders (all men) convened by Virgil Blossom to discuss the Supreme
Court decision. Instead of asking the community leaders about their expecta-
tions for desegregation, Blossom spent most of the time explaining his ideas
for integration combined with a construction plan for some new schools in
the district. Finally, Blossom stopped talking and L.C. immediately asked
whether “the Board [intended] to integrate the schools in 1954?”

Blossom replied, “No, it must be done slowly. For instance, we must
complete the additional school buildings that are now being started.” Bates
turned abruptly and walked out of the meeting.

Now, L.C. Bates was known to be a man of few words and cynical, but
he was not the problem. By Blossom’s own account other men at the meet-
ing expressed their displeasure at delaying implementation of the Supreme
Court decision.  

5. VIRGIL T. BLOSSOM, IT HAS HAPPENED HERE 12 (1959); see also JOHN A. KIRK,
REDEFINING THE COLOR LINE: BLACK ACTIVISM IN LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS, 1940–1970 93
(2002); GRIF STOCKLEY, DAISY BATES: CIVIL RIGHTS CRUSADER FROM ARKANSAS 67 (2005).
unequivocal that it can be compressed into three words—SEGREGATION IS UNCONSTITUTIONAL." On May 22, the school board announced that it would develop school attendance zones and prepare to implement "a sound school program on an integrated basis" while waiting for the Supreme Court's guidelines. The executive committee of Little Rock's NAACP chapter welcomed the news and wanted to cooperate with the school board and the superintendent in devising a successful desegregation plan for all residents of Little Rock. That summer Daisy Bates followed Blossom around to every public speaking engagement he made about desegregating the school district so the NAACP could devise ways to help; but she learned next to nothing about what he and the school board had in mind.

When September rolled around, the 1954–55 school year began in Little Rock without any black students enrolled in traditionally white schools. The NAACP's state legal redress committee headed by Pine Bluff attorney Wiley Branton paid a visit on the Little Rock School Board and asked the district not to follow a "wait and see" policy on integration. In addition, the school board's lack of willingness to consult with African Americans greatly concerned the lawyers. Branton informed the board that the NAACP expected and was willing to help "the Board . . . map plans for integration with

7. Like many American cities, World War II profoundly affected Little Rock and its environs. Thanks to the construction of a new Air Force Base in 1953, close to a 70% increase in population gave Little Rock approximately 100,000 residents by the mid-1950s. Of that population, almost 30% was African American and living in the east and southeast sections of the city, while 70% was Caucasian and living in the central and western portion of the city. Not too surprisingly, as elsewhere in the United States, the population growth in Little Rock coupled with the post-war baby boom stretched the physical facilities of the school system to the limit. See C. Fred Williams, Class: The Central Issue in the 1957 Little Rock School Crisis, 56 ARK. HIST. Q. 341 (1997). According to a segment of The Negro and the Schools printed in the Arkansas Gazette on May 16, 1954, Little Rock’s black population stood at 23% in 1950—a decline from 38.4% in 1940. Throughout the state the population declined by 2% between 1940–1950, with the black population decreasing by 11.6% as the white population increased by 1.1%.

The Little Rock School District was not only the largest district in the state; it also had the highest percentage of black students in an urban area. Despite being headquarters for the Arkansas State Conference of Branches of the NAACP (ASC), Little Rock did not have the most radical African American population in the state; Pine Bluff did. Perhaps the more moderate leadership in Little Rock's African American community and the school board of this "progressive" city would be able to make desegregation work smoothly. In any event, whatever happened in Little Rock would have a major impact on how the rest of the state implemented the Supreme Court's decision. John N. Popham, Negro Parløy in South Asks "Give and Take" to End Bias, N.Y. TIMES, May 23, 1954, at A1.

8. Interview by Elizabeth Jacoway with Daisy Bates (contained in the Southern Historical Collections, Documenting the South project at www.unc.edu).
the aid of patrons, colored and white, and put them into effect as soon as possible and with as little trouble as possible."

Superintendent Blossom replied that the school district intended to do the best possible job in crafting school attendance zones, and he even offered to meet with Branton and the redress committee after completing the desegregation studies in a month or two. The meeting never took place, and the desegregation plan was not ready until late May 1955.

During the last week of May 1955, Blossom announced his broad plan for the "gradual integration" of the Little Rock School District. In the first phase, high schools would integrate via "color blind" attendance zones—a new west side school to open in the fall of 1957, the current Little Rock Central High School, and a new east side school under construction and scheduled to open in early 1956. In the second phase, junior high schools would begin desegregation around 1960; and in the third phase, elementary schools would desegregate after 1960.

Unfortunately, that would all change on May 31, 1955, when the Supreme Court issued the Brown II implementation decision calling for school districts to desegregate "on a racially non-discriminatory basis with all deliberate speed." In Little Rock, the ruling signaled an abrupt change


11. Little Rock’s population of 102,000 was approximately 25% African American. Little Rock School District enrollment in 1953-54 was 17,354, of which 24.2% was African American. Southern School News 1:2 (Oct. 1954), at 3. The other lawyers accompanying Branton were: Chris Mercer, Thad Williams, George Howard, Jr., and Jackie Shropshire. Negro Group Is Assured Little Rock Will Integrate, Ark. Gazette, Sept. 10, 1954, at A1; Same Soup Warmed Over When Local School Board Evades Petitioners, Ark. State Press, Sept. 17, 1954, at 1, 4. Blossom mistakenly placed his quote in this story about "not delaying for delay’s sake" into his May 1954 meeting with African American ministers in his autobiography (p. 13), and the mistake has been repeated by Kirk and Stockley. See Kirk, supra note 5, at 93; Stockley, supra note 5, at 68; see also Integration Blueprint Prepared, Ark. Democrat, Sept. 10, 1954, at 14 (emphasizing that a plan would be ready in thirty to sixty days and called the group which met with the School Board "parents and lawyers."). Attorney Chris Mercer had children in the Little Rock district. The meeting never took place, and the desegregation plan was not ready until late May 1955.

12. Blossom, supra note 5, at 23.


14. Brent J. Aucoin, The Southern Manifesto and Southern Opposition to Desegregation, 55 Ark. Hist. Q. 173, 185 (1996). There was reason to be optimistic about Arkansas. Two school districts in the northwest region of the state already had desegregated without any problems. In addition, of the state’s 75 counties, fifteen of them did not have black students in public schools, and 22 others had black student enrollment of less than 10%, which indicated they would have little to no trouble desegregating. The remaining 37 counties had black student enrollment ranging between 11 to 60.5%, with the higher percentages located in the southeastern portion of Arkansas.
to Superintendent Blossom’s plan. The *Southern School News* acknowledged that while the plan was “news” to the general public, Blossom had presented the desegregation plan to numerous civic and community organizations to answer their questions and listen to their suggestions. Unfortunately, neither Blossom nor the school board nor the *Southern School News* ever discussed the current proposal directly with the NAACP. Instead, the reporter stated, “The integration plan is subject to final approval by the Little Rock School Board, and, in a sense, by Negro leaders. Thus far, there has been no indication that the NAACP is unhappy with the Little Rock plan.”

To complicate matters further, at some point over the summer of 1955 numerous sources indicated that the Little Rock School Board substantially changed the Blossom plan. In addition to moving the starting date for integration back to 1957 or 1958, Blossom made all Negro teacher assignments to Horace Mann High School and all white teacher assignments to Central,
Technical High, and Hall High (the new school on the west side).\(^\text{16}\) By virtue of placing an all-black teaching staff at Horace Mann, it became the "negro" school. White students (but not black students) could apply for "exceptions" to the attendance zones. In the end Mann would be black, Hall would be white, and Central High School would become the focus of desegregation in the fall of 1957.

On July 10, 1955, the NAACP formed a special committee that included the parents of some students to express their disapproval of Blossom's "vague" proposal—especially in regard to desegregating elementary schools—to the school board on July 28. At that meeting the committee asked the school board to begin a program of racial integration in September 1955. School board President Dr. William G. Cooper thanked the group and pledged to respond to their request in a week or so.\(^\text{17}\) Nothing happened.

Tired of waiting for change, six months later on Monday, January 23, 1956, twenty-seven black students appeared at four white Little Rock public schools—the schools closest to their homes—(two high schools, one junior high, and an elementary school) and requested transfers for the spring semester.\(^\text{18}\) Not only had parents wearied to the lack of accurate information coming from Superintendent Blossom's office:

[T]hey were tired of exposing their little children to all weather and traffic hazards and passing schools in their immediate vicinity to get to schools designated Negro in defiance of the law of the land. They stated they were tired of having their children denied technical training when such training is made available for others.\(^\text{19}\)

After being referred to the Superintendent, Blossom denied the students' request based on set policy.\(^\text{20}\) The actions of these students initiated

\(^{16}\) Working-class white citizens complained that Blossom's plan favored Little Rock's elite, whose children would attend the newly completed Hall High School. JACOWAY, supra note 15, at 52.

\(^{17}\) SOUTHERN SCHOOL NEWS 2:2, August 1955. In mid-June the Arkansas NAACP adopted a policy on integration in which they contacted every school district in the state with Negro children enrolled and requested that they adopt a plan for desegregation immediately. For those school districts that the NAACP had petitioned for desegregation a year earlier the ASC sent a letter reminding the school boards of the Supreme Court's May 31 decision. ARK STATE PRESS, June 17, 1955, at 1.

\(^{18}\) Eight female students from Horace Mann High School attempted to enroll at Central High School; one male student attempted to enroll at Tech High School; four students tried to enroll at Forest Heights Junior High; and fourteen students tried to enroll at Forest Heights Elementary School. Carl Childress, Negroes Try to Enroll in City Schools; Rebuffed, ARK. DEMOCRAT, Jan. 23, 1956, at 1.

\(^{19}\) Blossom, School Board Members Are Defendants, ARK. STATE PRESS, Feb. 10, 1956, at 1. The mention of technical training referred to the lack of an auto mechanics course at Horace Mann after the instructor quit.

\(^{20}\) SOUTHERN SCHOOL NEWS, Feb. 1956, at 11.
the *Aaron v. Cooper*\(^\text{21}\) case in which the parents of the students (represented by Pine Bluff attorney Wiley Branton\(^\text{22}\)) challenged the school district to let black students into white schools immediately rather than waiting for the Blossom plan.

Satisfied with the Blossom plan, the Little Rock School Board and Superintendent Blossom were shocked that these black parents could not wait a little longer to send their children to white schools. In fact, school board attorneys found this lack of patience so unusual for Little Rock’s African American population that their initial defense strategy centered on proving that the NAACP’s “aggressive” national office in New York was really behind the case. In a memo written to the defense team, lead attorney A.E. House stated as follows: “It seems to me that when [the] NAACP comes into a community like Little Rock and starts dictating what is a reasonable time to accomplish integration, it may be opening itself to criticism.”\(^\text{23}\)

What the school board, Virgil Blossom, or the defense attorneys did not understand was that African Americans were tired of waiting, and not just to integrate white schools, but to have the equal facilities of their own promised by *Plessy v. Ferguson*.\(^\text{24}\) Throughout the spring of 1956 the school district continued to treat Negro students separately, but they had a difficult time treating them equally. At the March meeting, the Little Rock School Board designated two new “Negro” schools for the next school year: Horace Mann High School, which may have been new but still was not the equal of Central High, and Pfeiffer Camp, which was needed to relieve the overcrowding at George Washington Carver Elementary School. Over at the *Arkansas State Press*, Associate Editor Rev. S.S. Taylor noticed and took offense. In a column titled “We Don’t Like ‘Negro Schools’,” Taylor wrote:

> The Negro believes that the only reason for calling a school “negro” is to induce Negro children to stay in and white to stay out. The Negro parent whose children have to walk past one school to get to another and then


\(^{22}\) In addition to Branton, the legal team included U. Simpson Tate of Dallas, and Thurgood Marshall and Robert L. Carter of New York. The plaintiff school children ranged in age from six to eighteen. John Aaron, who along with his sister Thelma was a plaintiff, was the first-named plaintiff because the children were listed alphabetically; thus, he is the “Aaron” of the case name. Clyde Bates, the son of L.C. Bates, was another one of the plaintiffs. The defendants were the president (William G. Cooper) and secretary of the Little Rock School District, the superintendent of schools, and the district. Lawyers A.F. House, Frank E. Chowning, Leon B. Catlett, Henry E. Spitzberg, and Richard C. Butler represented the defendants. Lynn Foster, *Aaron v. Cooper*, in *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, available at http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=741.


\(^{24}\) 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
not be permitted to study fundamental subjects in the school farther dis-
tant, is the original reason for the first fight for equality and finally for
integration. If equality of facilities had been given a modicum of atten-
tion long ago, the question of integration would never have arisen. 25

The lack of equality in Little Rock schools was not limited to build-
ings, either. For example, the board voted to repair all of the band instru-
ments from Dunbar High School for $1,500 so they could be used at Horace
Mann High School because Dunbar Junior High School did not have a
band. 26 And yet the board purchased $8,500 worth of new musical instru-
ments for Southwest Junior High School when it opened. 27

In March, the board also divided up the old library books at Dunbar
High School between Horace Mann High School and Dunbar Junior High.
They donated the books used by the now-defunct Dunbar Junior College to
Philander Smith College. 28 When the board later approved a mandatory Ju-
nior High School Reading Materials list for school libraries, Dunbar needed
more books than any of the white junior high schools just to meet the mini-
mum requirements. Forest Heights Junior High School, a new school lo-
cated in the so-called “silk-stocking district,” needed the fewest books be-
cause parents privately purchased books for the library.

The list of inequities at Little Rock’s “colored schools” could go on
and on. Dunbar’s sports teams had no “official schedule” of games with
neighboring schools, but East Side, West Side, Pulaski Heights, Forest
Heights and Southwest junior high schools played against each other as well
as Catholic High School, and two schools in North Little Rock—Fourth
Street and Jefferson Davis. 29 But Little Rock’s Negroes had no recourse: no
one represented them on the school board, nor did any African American
teachers or administrators attend school board meetings.

Clueless to the real conditions under which African American children
labored to get an education in Little Rock schools, the defense trial team
decided to depose Little Rock NAACP Chapter President Rev. J.C. Cren-
chwaw and ASC President Daisy Bates in May 1956 to show that the “total
and immediate integration” of Little Rock public schools was unfeasible.

Mrs. Bates’s testimony revealed that despite the numerous times Afri-
can Americans had courtesy meetings with the school board about desegre-
gation, nothing substantive ever resulted. And when informed, “There is no

25. S.S. Taylor, We Don’t Like “Negro Schools,” ARK. STATE PRESS, Apr. 13, 1956, at 4. The Little Rock chapter of the NAACP did not like the racial designation, either, and pro-
tested to the school board. SOUTHERN SCHOOL NEWS, MAY 1956.
28. Little Rock Board of Education Meeting Minutes, Mar. 29, 1956. The board pledged
to buy new books for each school to fill the gaps in their collection.
29. Little Rock Board of Education Meeting Minutes, Nov. 29, 1956.
law that says integration will be immediate,” Rev. Crenchaw replied, “There is none that says it will be gradual either.”30

To make matters worse, if anyone questioned exactly how progressive Little Rock was in terms of race at this time, one of the defense lawyers—ostensibly a “law and order” moderate who endorsed desegregation—repeatedly referred to African Americans in open court as “niggers” until Mrs. Bates “reminded [him of] the correct pronunciation of the word Negro.” While she had the attorney’s attention, Bates also instructed him to address her as “Mrs. Bates” and not presume to call her “Daisy.” “That is something that is reserved for my intimate friends and my husband. This morning is the first time I ever saw you, you will refrain from calling me Daisy.”31

Of course, relationships between whites and blacks of the opposite sex had always been a difficult situation. While legions of light skinned Negroes resulted from the pregnancies of enslaved women by their owners in the antebellum period, and “intimate” relationships between domestic servants and their male employers after that, segregationists focused on miscegenation or race-mixing as one of the major dangers of school desegregation. When minister and Capital Citizens’ Council member Wesley Pruden asked the school board about the relationship between Negro boys and white girls that might happen when Central High desegregated, L.C. Bates quipped, “Evidently the relationship between the white male species and the Negro femmes is so well established and has produced so many offspring, that it needs no clarification.”32

In late August 1956, federal Judge John Miller dismissed the suit on the basis that the Blossom plan was adequate and would “lead to an effective and gradual adjustment of the problem.” Miller also gave the court jurisdiction over the case in the event that “further orders . . . may be necessary to obtain the effectuation of the plan.” The parents’ lawyers appealed the decision, and the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Judge Miller’s ruling that Little Rock’s desegregation plan was sufficient.

While neither the parents nor the Little Rock chapter of the NAACP got what they wanted, Wiley Branton mentioned that “some aspects” of the appellate court’s decision pleased him: “The courts have given us a cloak of protection against some die-hard, anti-integration groups who might still try to delay integration.” The “cloak of protection” would become the lynch pin


31. State Heads for Integration Now: Both Nix on School Board’s Plan if It Doesn’t Contain Immediate Integration, ARK. STATE PRESS, May 11, 1956, at 1. See also STOCKLEY, supra note 5, at 9. Jacoway fails to mention this incident in her book.

32. This, We Believe, ARK. STATE PRESS, July 12, 1957, at 1.
in enforcing a Supreme Court decision in Little Rock that only African Americans wanted but the entire nation needed.

III. CONCLUSION: A FAILURE TO LISTEN

In early summer 1956 Little Rock School Superintendent Virgil Blossom made a public speech purporting that gradual school desegregation complied with the law, met the standards established by court decisions, and would preserve good race relations. In an editorial L.C. Bates made it clear

... that speakers who speak of good "race relations" between the white and Negro, are just a little out of line in their interpretation. ... [W]hat they really mean, is "powerful non-resistant white domination." The power to keep the Negro meek and humble, where he will not exert any action that is contrary to the white man's will.33

Bates also took Blossom to task for saying he knew what the "colored race" wanted. If Blossom really knew what the Negro wants, Bates maintained, he would "know that the Negro is an American citizen, and wants to share in the privileges and opportunities guaranteed him under the federal constitution, and live his life as any other American citizen."34

Had Mr. Blossom, the school board, and the majority of Little Rock's white population actually considered what African Americans thought about desegregation and acted upon that knowledge, rather than acting "in their best interest," the white majority would have been better prepared to challenge the segregationists' attempts to stop the integration of Central High School at all costs. Instead, they chose to assume that school desegregation would move forward in the same peaceful manner in which segregation ended in the city's buses and libraries. So they made their plan, defended it in court, and waited.

By remaining silent, the white majority chose to believe the myth that Little Rock really was a racially progressive city and that the desegregation of Central High School would not be a problem. The myth may have convinced fellow believers but not the well-organized and extremely vocal members and supporters of the Capital Citizens' Council or the newly-formed Mothers' League of Central High School.

Instead, the segregationists, who probably did not outnumber the silent majority, took action to bombard Governor Faubus with letters, telegrams, and phone calls demanding that desegregation be stopped. They helped convince the Governor to block the court-ordered integration of Central High

34. Id.
School with the Arkansas National Guard while the rest of the city sat paralyzed and the world watched.