

Providence College

DigitalCommons@Providence

---

History & Classics Undergraduate Theses

History & Classics

---

Spring 2023

## Twentieth Century Education Reform: Centralization and the Integration of Providence Public School

Emily Cavanaugh  
*Providence College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/history\\_undergrad\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/history_undergrad_theses)



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Cavanaugh, Emily, "Twentieth Century Education Reform: Centralization and the Integration of Providence Public School" (2023). *History & Classics Undergraduate Theses*. 70.  
[https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/history\\_undergrad\\_theses/70](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/history_undergrad_theses/70)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the History & Classics at DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in History & Classics Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact [dps@providence.edu](mailto:dps@providence.edu).

**Twentieth Century Education Reform:  
Centralization and the Integration of Providence Public School**

**By  
Emily Cavanaugh  
HIS 490 History Honors Thesis**

**Providence College  
History and Classics Department  
Spring 2023**



## Figures and Tables

1.1	Percent Distribution of Families and Unrelated Individuals by Income in 1959.....	23
2.1	Map of Providence Districts .....	24
2.2	Political Cartoon .....	27
1.2	High School Enrollment and Race Percentage as of November 16, 1970 .....	29
1.3	High School Estimates of September 1971 .....	31

## Contents

Figures .....	iii
Acknowledgement .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Prologue: Early Twentieth Century Education Reform .....	8
Chapter One: The Providence Plan .....	17
Chapter Two: Centralization, De Facto Segregation, and Neighborhood Schools .....	34
Conclusion .....	52

## Acknowledgment

I would like to start by thanking Providence College History and Classics Department, for giving me the opportunity and support to complete this project. Without the Providence College Undergraduate Summer Research Grant, I would not have had the ability to spend the entire summer in the archives. This opportunity allowed me to fully explore the sources I found and set the foundation for the rest of the project.

Thank you to my family, for supporting my academic career at Providence College, and always encouraging me to follow what I am passionate about. Especially my sister Molly, who has always been my academic role model and inspires me to challenge myself in the classroom.

Thank you to my classmate and friend Alec Fraggos, for reading all of my rough drafts for the past four years. You motivated me to do my best and your enthusiasm and wit made every class we took together so enjoyable.

Lastly, a special thank you to my advisor, Dr. Smith. I first had Dr. Smith as a professor freshman year for History 101, and getting to work with him every year has pushed me to become a better researcher and writer. His urban history class from the Fall 2021 semester gave me the inspiration for this project by introducing me to the Urban League of Rhode Island Collection. Thank you for your consistent help and support these past four years.

## Introduction

On June 25, 1974, the Mayor of Providence, Joseph A Doorley stood in front of the graduating class of Classical High School and applauded them on their accomplishments and encouraged them to aim for a life of success. He claimed that the 1974 graduating class represented “every neighborhood, every ethnic, every religion and every racial group in the city.”<sup>1</sup> This was the first graduating class to complete four years in an integrated high school. However, Mayor Doorley also congratulated the school on maintaining its traditional mission, and he encouraged students to pursue higher education and roles of leadership within the community.<sup>2</sup> Classical High School was the public college preparatory school in the city of Providence – students had to test into the school and thus it attracted the brightest kids in the city. Prior to the integration of public schools in Providence, Classical had one of the lowest percentages of black students. Mayor Doorley finished his speech by demanding that the graduates not “accept the status quo” and to enjoy the “excitement of achievement.”<sup>3</sup> The speech that Mayor Doorley gave, inspired the Classical graduates as he sent them off into the real world. He praised the school for its diversity yet at the same time congratulated them on maintaining the traditional views of Classical.

Only four days earlier Mayor Doorley gave a very different speech to the 1974 graduating class of Central High School. In the Central High speech, Doorley congratulated the graduates on being the “first fully desegregated class under the providence plan” but continued

---

<sup>1</sup> Classical High School Graduation Speech, 25 June, 1974, Mayor Joseph A Doorley Jr. Papers, Box 2: Doorley Speeches, Folder: Speeches, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>2</sup> Classical High School Graduation Speech, Mayor Joseph A. Doorley Jr. Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

on to paint a dark picture for their future.<sup>4</sup> He warned the graduates that “what is ahead for all of you is very difficult - underemployment, unemployment, unreasonable money rates. Picture not bright - but not disastrous.”<sup>5</sup> In both speeches Mayor Doorley congratulated the classes on being the first classes to graduate from a fully integrated schools. However, the speeches are very different in tone as Doorley encouraged the Classical graduates to go onto higher education and warned the Central graduates that their future would be difficult. The difference in the speeches reflect the results of the city’s plan for school integration – the Providence Plan. Although these schools were considered integrated under the guidelines of the Providence Plan, the black student population was not equally distributed between all four high schools. Under the Providence Plan 28% of Central’s student body was black while only 8% of Classics student body was black. The differences in these speeches represented the failure of Providence to successfully integrate public schools and points to issues within the structure of the education system as a whole.

The United States education system has gone through many changes throughout the course of history. However, the twentieth century housed some of the most drastic reforms. In the early 1900s education was centralized in the United States. After World War I, there was a fear of outside influence in the United States, so politicians used education policy as a way to invest in the safety and security of the nation. Fast forward to the 1950s, race and inequality were written into the narrative of education policy as civil rights groups pushed to integrate schools. Inequality resulted from the education policies of the twenties because the structure of the education system established an institution that protected segregated American cities. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Central High School Graduation Speech, 21 June 1974, Mayor Joseph A Doorley Jr. Papers, Box 2: Doorley Speeches, Folder: Speeches, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>5</sup> Central High School Graduation Speech, Mayor Joseph A Doorley Jr. Papers.



national movement to integrate public schools followed the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*. The court's decision set the precedent that the school policy of separate but equal was inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional.

The early 1900s saw a progressive shift in policy regarding education in the United States. An example of this shift is the 1918 National Education Association (NEA) proposal for a federal department of education. The NEA's proposal was not successful because of "the war and Red Scare, Progressive reform and Prohibition" all of these events "contributed to the pervasive suspicion of encroaching federal power that informed the education debate."<sup>6</sup> The reasons why the education department did not pass echo the suspicions of a growing federal government. Ironically, it was also the war and the Red Scare that triggered some Americans – mostly wealthy business owners – to call for a universal education system in order to "create a shared identity and revitalize American democracy."<sup>7</sup> The goal of the universal education system was to offer "average citizens and their children a key position in a grassroots movement."<sup>8</sup> The narrative of the movement "told Americans that the nation's path to glory rested not in the halls of power in Washington DC, but inside its public schools."<sup>9</sup> A universal system would centralize education at the federal level. Ultimately, the education system was centralized in pursuance of strengthening the nation and better preparing it for a modern and global society.

Another reason why some Americans wanted central control of the education system was because of the rise of immigration and the fear that new ideas would change American society.

---

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Dumenil, "The Insatiable Maw of Bureaucracy': Antistatistism and Education Reform in the 1920s.," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 2 (September 1990): 523.

<sup>7</sup> Cody Dodge Ewert, "Schools on Parade: Patriotism and the Transformation of Urban Education at the Dawn of the Progressive Era.," *Journal of the Gilded Age & Progressive Era* 16, no. 1 (January 2017): 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ewert, *Schools on Parade*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Anglo-Americans created schools that protected American exceptionalism and assimilated immigrants and minority groups into American culture so they would not change the social and cultural make-up of the country. Towns and states across the country gave more power to school boards to control district lines.<sup>10</sup> The changing make up and power of local school boards is a trend that continued throughout the twentieth century because school boards decided how to implement the policies and court decisions handed down from state and federal government. One constant throughout the early decades of the twentieth century was education being used as an institution that protected democracy:

Efforts to standardize citizenship training came just as the nation's political winds were moving in a decidedly conservative direction. Earlier education advocates had avoided defining the politics of patriotic citizenship. They insisted that schooling itself, not a specific brand of instruction, would create a generation capable of revolutionizing the nation's politics.<sup>11</sup>

Although there was push back against a universalized school system the overall direction of the early 1900s was towards a more centralized education system in the United States. The policies born out of this movement directly led to the ultimate oppression of minority racial and economic groups in the 1950s.

The education system went through extreme changes during the 1950s because of the 1954 Supreme Court Decision *Brown v Board of Education*. After the courts called for the integration of all public schools, cities drafted and implemented programs, which effectively rewrote entire school districts to combat segregation. Integration policies created a “compensatory education system.” A compensatory education system assumed that segregation

---

<sup>10</sup> Elijah Anderson, “The Devolution of the Inner-City High School.,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science* 673, no. 1 (September 2017): 60–79.

<sup>11</sup> Cody Dodge Ewert, “Redefining Citizenship: Curriculum Reform and the Changing Politics of Education in World War I-Era Butte.,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 67, no. 4 (2017): 58.

within schools resulted from environmental factors and cultural deficits rather than the structure of the neighborhood schools system. Compensatory education:

dates back to the Higher Horizons Project, the Ford Foundation, Gray Areas Project, Title I projects under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, More Effective Schools in New York City, and so forth. It is based on the assumption that education is improved by utilizing remedial measures to deal with problems such as underachievement and lack of motivation. This pattern is rehabilitative. It assumes that the central problem concerns the learner and not the school, that children of the slums are disadvantaged because of environmental and cultural deficits, and that through a program of remediation the learner can be lifted to profit from the standard education program.<sup>12</sup>

Rehabilitative policy was created to integrate schools, and these reforms focused on the environment rather than curriculum. One important theme of the 1950s is the involvement of organizations, such as the Ford Foundation and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored (NAACP), that influenced the education system. Despite the immediate efforts to integrate school systems following the *Brown* decision, the country did not successfully repair the damages of segregation that plagued the American school system. “The wisdom of the decision of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to attack segregation via challenges to segregated schooling and, in so doing, reaffirmed the centrality of education as an instrument of public policy, a strategy for planned changed.”<sup>13</sup> The NAACP used centralization as a tool to implement integration policy across American cities. Despite the wisdom of the NAACP, the policies in the fifties did not solve inequality issues long term, and this is especially clear in the 1970s.

---

<sup>12</sup> Mario D. Fantini, “Urban School Reform: Educational Agenda for Tomorrow’s America By Mario D. Fantini,” n.d., 267–68.

<sup>13</sup> Lagemann, E. C., & Miller, L. M. P. (1996). *Brown v. Board of Education: The Challenge for today's schools*. Teachers College Press., 4–5.

The twentieth century brought lots of changes and movements into the American education system. Starting with the reforms to make the education system more patriotic, education was transformed into a political tool to better protect and prepare the country for the future and the changing global sphere. The *Brown v Board of Education* decision in the 1950s caused reform to the education system, and schools across the country attempted to integrate and end racial inequalities. Finally, when rapid integration declined in the 1970s, education policies shifted to federal incentives regarding curriculum and testing. Despite all these different phases in the education system, one theme that remains constant is the theme of centralization of power. With every new movement and policy reform, power is moved away from the communities that individual schools served and moved up to state and federal governments.

This thesis will explore the specific integration plan of Providence public schools in the 1960s and early 1970s. It will start by analyzing specific details of early twentieth century education reform and how early efforts to make the education system more patriotic set the foundation for the centralized education system that emerged in the mid-twentieth century. As Providence implemented their integration plan, it became clear that education was centralized at the state and federal level. Ultimately, the integration plan did not successfully integrate the black student population equally throughout the public schools. This failure to equally distribute students is a result of the centralized education system. The last chapter of the thesis will examine how segregation and the neighborhood school structure affected integration in Providence and other cities around the country. The centralization of the education system was a slow process that took place throughout the twentieth century. It was intended that by creating a universal education system schools would become more equal. However, these reforms failed to

create an education system that represented diverse cultures and minority groups in the country.

In conclusion, integration failed to make the education system equal for all Americans.

## Prologue

### Early Twentieth Century Education Reform

On October 21, 1891 at *Prospect park in Brooklyn New York* half a million people watched as a new memorial was unveiled and dedicated to the Veterans of the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> However, this event was reported by the *New York Times* as a moment for Brooklyn public schools to arise “as a symbol of national greatness on par with America’s sanctified heroes, suggesting that popular support for public education could secure the glorious future many claimed was within the nation’s reach.”<sup>15</sup> The narrative surrounding the dedication of the memorial shifted to focus on Brooklyn public schools because a parade of 10,000 Brooklyn public school students and the singing of patriotic songs and speeches immediately followed the dedication. One of the speakers recited the *Pledge of Allegiance*, for the first time, and the pledge went on to be a ritual that is conducted in schools across the country and is a practice that continues today. The Pledge of Allegiance and its role in this demonstration of Brooklyn Public Schools exemplifies patriotic thinking at the center of the growth of modern public schools in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, this type of patriotic thinking was deeply rooted in “concerns about the nation’s shifting racial and ethnic character” and “assumptions about the importance of race to the nation’s past and future seeped into both quadricentennial celebrations and the lessons that students received in classrooms.”<sup>17</sup> Although this demonstration in Prospect Park took place

---

<sup>14</sup> Ewert, *Schools on Parade*, 65.

<sup>15</sup> Ewert, *Schools on Parade*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

at the end of the nineteenth century, it set the foundation for early twentieth century education reform that worked to centralize and universalize the education system.

The goal of this prologue is to provide context for the 1950s and 60s when cities and towns across the country integrated their school systems. The 1910s and 1920s showed the start of a reform movement that shifted the power of control within the education system. Power was shifted away from local authorities and centralized in independent councils and at the state and federal level. This prologue will walk through the politics behind these reforms, which originated as a response to World War I, and go into specific examples of policy change which resulted in a more centralized system. By the mid-twentieth century, these reforms came back into question as many cities and states worked quickly to desegregate schools following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954.

At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a strong focus on education reform in the United States. Prior to this, the education system was not widely centralized, and decisions regarding school curriculums were left up to the individual schools and their districts. It was not until 1979 that the United States created a federal department of education despite appeals in the beginning of the twentieth century. Following World War I, there was a call to reform the education system. A faction of the United States was in favor of reforming the school system in order to educate the general public with the goal of promoting democracy by teaching the future generations. People believed “that just as vocational training would make students capable workers, social studies would ready them for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.”<sup>18</sup> The motivation behind the emphasis the importance of social studies in the school curriculum was rooted in the need to protect the American democracy and protect the nation from outside

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 61.

influence or foreign attack. The state of Montana provides an example for this larger national trend. Leading educators in Montana during the post-World War I era believed that a strong civics curriculum would prepare the future generations of the United States to be better citizens. These educators “saw the war as a prime opportunity to unite the nation behind high-minded ideals like President Woodrow Wilson’s charge to ‘make the world safe for democracy.’”<sup>19</sup> During the same period, the National Education Association (NEA) and the U.S. Bureau of Education published a strategic plan that called for new standards for high school, and curriculum that worked towards a specific set of outcomes.<sup>20</sup> The goal of the new standards was to create a collective wisdom in the nation that would better protect the country. This moment in American history set the foundation for the rest of the century because it marked the beginning of the shift towards a centralized education system as more Americans recognized the importance of education to any thriving democracy.

Beginning in the 1920s, there is an attempt to centralize education at the state and federal level. Some politicians worked for federal funds to be passed down to the states to ensure that curriculum standards were met across the country. Not surprisingly, there was push back as some Americans viewed these reforms as a continuation of the progressive agenda. In 1918, the NEA proposed a bill to create a federal Department of Education, however it did not pass “largely because of the efforts of the Catholic church, but also because coming off of the progressive era and WWI people feared a growing federal government that would overrule state autonomy.”<sup>21</sup> Rural communities often did not support centralization because they believed that it would take

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Dumenil, *The Insatiable Maw of Bureaucracy*, 501.



away the autonomy of local communities to make decisions.<sup>22</sup> Critics of the federal department and a centralized education system focused on how bills emphasized English as the primary mode of instruction, something they felt would isolate the immigrant population. The reformers saw the bill as “a vehicle for creating homogeneity in American society. This aspect of the bill generated support from business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and nationalistic voluntary associations such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Masons.”<sup>23</sup> These nationalistic organization, specifically the Ku Klux Klan, represent why early opposition to the proposal feared it would be a way to promote homogenous ideas throughout American schools. As early steps of centralization happened – such as the proposal of a federal department – people already recognized that allowing the federal government to have more control of education would take power away from local authorities.

Another reason why so many Americans wanted central control of the education system was because of the rise of immigration and the fear that new ideas would change American society. White Americans created schools which protected American exceptionalism and assimilated immigrants and minority groups into American culture so they would not change the social and cultural make-up of the country. In order to do this, towns and states gave more power to school boards to control district lines.<sup>24</sup> The changing make up and power of local school boards is a theme that continued because school boards were the bodies that decided how to implement the policies handed down from state and federal government.

---

<sup>22</sup> Dumenil, *The Insatiable Maw of Bureaucracy*, 501.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 506.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *The Devolution of the Inner-City High School*, 60–79.

The Massachusetts State Commissioner of Education in the 1920s, Payson Smith, promoted the belief that democracy must be built on an education system that is universal and efficient. Some groups believed that it would be impossible to improve education without abolishing the neighborhood financial structure. A school system that follows the neighborhood structure is when the property tax from each individual neighborhood funds their own school. Smith suggested that the answer to the problem was “to think in terms of larger units and to widen the boundaries of our responsibility.”<sup>25</sup> Moving the school system away from the neighborhood structure and widening the boundaries of responsibility in turn created a centralized school system. There were many voices at play surrounding education reform in the 1920s – from the people who wanted to strengthen education in order to promote democracy, to people who feared that a centralized education system would further marginalize minority groups. However, national education reform during the early twentieth century centralized the education system in order to create a universal standard in the country. In turn this created a collective wisdom that would protect and propel the nation into the twentieth century and beyond.

In the early twentieth century, the Providence school system followed the education reforms that took place across the country such as changing the structure of school boards. The Providence School Board went through a rearrangement, and there was a demand from the people and outside organizations to reduce the size of the school board. Specifically, a school board survey was conducted at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the results showed that people wanted a school board with five to seven members with each member serving four-

---

<sup>25</sup> Dumenil, *The Insatiable Maw of Bureaucracy*, 504.

to-five-year terms.<sup>26</sup> One of the biggest outcomes of the survey was the emphasis on the nonpartisanship of the school board. The results of the survey suggested that the members of the board consist of either mayoral appointees or elected officials. Regardless of the selection process, all members must have been nonpartisan and represented the city rather than a party platform.<sup>27</sup> This call for a smaller and nonpartisan school board reflected the larger trends of the early 1900s. A school board structured in the way the results of the survey suggested, would be less affected by public opinions, and the power would be centralized in an isolated board. This ultimately took political power away from the people and the individual schools.

Providence was not the only city restructuring its school board. In 1911, Boston changed the size of its school board from a body of twenty-four members to five members. Following this, Pittsburgh reduced its school board from thirty-two members to nine members, and this took place in several cities across the country.<sup>28</sup> Decreasing the size of school boards is one example of policy reform that centralized the education system because it made the school system less responsive to democratic pressures and isolated the body that held all of the power. Another example are the reforms to the way in which school board members were elected. The survey that was cited earlier also proposed selecting school boards “at large instead of by wards.”<sup>29</sup> Choosing members at large rather than by ward gives less representation to marginalized communities because school board members will ultimately be elected by the most affluent

---

<sup>26</sup> School Board Survey, n.d., Mss 651, Box 1, Folder 1: School Board Survey, Providence Public Education Association Records, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

<sup>27</sup> School Board Survey, Providence Public Education Association Records.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

populations. In turn the school board did not represent the minority groups that received an inferior education.

At this time, the narrative around education reform was not specifically promoting centralization, rather the message was that these reforms were aiming to make the school board independent and separated from local authorities. Author L.S. Rowe addresses the idea of independent school boards – specifically from a financial standpoint – and claims “in every case in which the school authorities enjoy independent powers of taxation.” Rowe explained that “the opinions of such authorities are strongly in favor of the retention of the system. On the other hand, whenever the appropriations are in the hands of the local representative assembly, we find considerable agitation in favor of independent powers.”<sup>30</sup> A faction of the population believed that there should be an independent body separate from local school authorities that oversaw financial decisions. Inequality in the school system stemmed from the financial system, which was supported by neighborhood schools. If the body with financial control was independent of local authorities, then the voice of the people would be given less power in conversations regarding education finance.

An early twentieth century report on the financial relationship of the Rhode Island Department of Education to city governments, warned against the separation of financial and organizational decisions. The report explained the separation policy as following:

The identification in fact, if not in law, of the city and the school district led us to place the financial control over our education systems in councils. We failed to see, however, that this division of authority would fail to bring about close co-operation between the two independent bodies entrusted with the care of the school system. In any movement for reorganization, we will do well to keep the

---

<sup>30</sup> Article by L.S. Rowe “The Relation of the Department of Education to the City Government”, Mss 651, Box 1, Folder 1: School Boards, Providence Public Education Association Records, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI

lessons of this experience in mind. If we attempt to determine the financial powers of educational authorities before deciding the questions of administrative organization, we are likely to create as many evils as we attempt to remedy.”<sup>31</sup>

This report warned against two independent councils – one with control over money and the other oversaw administration –not co-operating, which resulted in one of the councils not getting a say in the other’s decision. If the council making the financial decisions is elected at large, then individual communities are left out of the decision as well. This ultimately resulted in an education system that was centralized at a higher level and removed from the control of local authorities and individual people.

Structural change of the education system was not the only type of reform happening at the turn of the twentieth century. The Providence School System proposed an amendment to its Constitution that required teachers and schools to get approval from the School Committee’s Committee on Textbooks if teachers or schools wanted to change a supplementary textbook used in the curriculum.<sup>32</sup> This led to rapid expansion of the School Committee’s power. On May 22, 1907, the School Committee requested that one textbook be used by all language teachers in the district. Again, on October 28, 1908, the School Sommittee decided that they had to approve the textbook for a school’s debating society.<sup>33</sup> This expanded the power of the School Committee to have final say on all textbooks used in the schools even school clubs and societies. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, issues of racial inequality arose as the power to choose textbooks came

---

<sup>31</sup> “The Financial Relation of the Department of Education to City Government, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science”, March 1900, Mss 651, Box 4, Folder: School Reports, Providence Public Education Association Records, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

<sup>32</sup> Meeting Minutes, n.d., Mss 214 sg 4, Box 3, Folder: Committee on Textbooks, Minutes 1905-1913, Providence Public School Records (1800-1932), Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

<sup>33</sup> Meeting Minutes, Providence Public School Records (1800-1932).

into question again because the textbooks that the school board approved did not reflect a diverse curriculum.

From a different point of view, reform that centralizes the education system “creates unity over larger areas and creates collective wisdom.” Specifically, “it also allows for differences between different economies to be less noticeable because materials are being sent from a larger organization above.”<sup>34</sup> This perspective highlights that broadly speaking, a centralized school system is meant to promote equality between communities with different socio-economic demographics. However, when reform made the decision-making bodies of the school system more independent from local authorities, it also took power and representation away from already marginalized populations.

This section has discussed the theme of education reform at the turn of the twentieth century in many different contexts. In a larger sense, centralization is a social movement which utilized the education system as a mode of strengthening democracy following the first World War. This type of larger centralization is represented by the proposal of a federal department of education in 1918. On the ground level, reforms such as Providence reducing the size of its school boards and electing members at large rather than by ward created centralization within individual cities. Another example of centralization is the requirement of submitting all textbook changes to the school board. The early decades of the twentieth century provide context for how the education system is structured; it is due to the structure of the education system that inequality is not corrected during the integration of the public school in Providence, Rhode Island and across the country.

---

<sup>34</sup> “Centralized vs Localized Administration of Public Education” by David Snedden, May 1910, Mss 651, Box 4, Folder: School Reports, Providence Public Education Association, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

## **Chapter One**

### **The Providence Plan**

In the 1960s, the city of Providence created a three-part integration plan that desegregated elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools throughout three different phases. This plan was created by a committee that brought different school officials together to create the best plan for the majority of the city. The plan focused on the physical placement of black and white students in specific schools with a small focus on curriculum. Although the Providence Plan made significant strides towards integration, it did not evenly distribute black and white students between all schools. The results of the Providence Plan were not successful because the early twentieth century education reforms created a centralized education system that promoted homogenous ideas in society and marginalized minority groups. Specifically looking at phase III of the Providence Plan, this chapter will look at the data behind the integration of the four high schools and show how the city allowed two of the high schools to have over student body that was 90% white. Before examining the specific details of Phase III, this chapter will walk through the different themes that carry throughout the 1950s and 60s and how these themes represent the overall disfunction of a centralized education system. Neighborhood schools are the immediate answer to why the structure of public schools failed to desegregate students of different socio-economic and racial background. Furthermore, the narrative around integration centered on the lack of motivation of black students and teachers. This took away from the importance of the structural changes that needed to be made in order to successfully integrate schools. Displacement was another issue that arose during the integration process because organizations such as the Urban League and the NAACP emphasized the importance of not putting the burden of integration on the black population. Early efforts of integration in Providence showed the

problems that the Providence Plan would face once implemented such as preventing wealthy white students from enrolling in private schools to avoid integrated public schools. In conclusion, results of the Providence Plan showed that it was not enough to redistribute the student population among the schools in the city. There needed to be significant structural changes to the education system in order to provide an equal education to all students.

The 1950s marked the first decade that both the federal government and state governments invested substantial resources into correcting racial inequality within the school system. Mid-twentieth century studies revealed that inequality within the school system was a result of generational oppression of black Americans in the United States. Within minority communities there was a cycle of oppression – black Americans had “no job opportunity but the most menial open to him.”<sup>35</sup> When younger generations saw that an education was not a guarantee for a good job many did “not take advantage of the training and vocational preparation available.”<sup>36</sup> Although this example shows inequality within the job market it effected education, and the cycle was repeated generation after generation because of the failure of the education system to provide an equal education to black Americans which in turn would allow black Americans equal access to better job opportunities.

Instead of looking for systematic sources of inequality within the school system, school officials labeled the problem as a lack of motivation in individuals. Black children who were under performing in school were labeled as “lacking in the habits, values, and goals necessary to

---

<sup>35</sup> “American Child Growing up Negro: The Negro Education” by Eli E. Cohen, n.d., Series 2, Box 20, Folder: Education Guidance 1945-1966, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>36</sup> “American Child Growing up Negro”, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection.



success.”<sup>37</sup> However, the research conducted during this time by organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League provided evidence that the achievement gap between white and black students was caused by difference in environment. These disparities “can be traced to differences in environmental, social and economic status, family educational background and to lower motivation.”<sup>38</sup> School districts based on neighborhoods will cause a difference in environment because poverty was isolated within school districts that served lower socio-economic populations. To say that black students were under performing due to lack of motivation rather than problems within the school system neglected how the structure of schools perpetuated inequality and the cycle of generational oppression.

Another major theme of integration was the emphasis on the messaging that integration benefited everyone not just marginalized communities. “Racially segregated school imposes upon children the inevitable stultifying burdens of petty provincialism, illogical fears and hatreds of people who are different, and a distorted image of themselves.”<sup>39</sup> Providence recognized that the most beneficial aspect of desegregation was physically putting black and white children in the same classroom. However, it is not enough for black and white students to be in the same classroom. There must also be a diverse curriculum. This was written into policy through curriculum reform; new books and materials were introduced that taught students about a variety of cultures.<sup>40</sup> Policy reform built on the idea that “black students in class can help whites

---

<sup>37</sup> “The Study of the Aspirations of a Selected Group of Negro High School Graduates”, n.d., Series 2, Box 20, Folder: Education High School Survey 1954-1966, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI. 3.

<sup>38</sup> “The Study of the Aspirations of a Selected Group of Negro High School Graduates”, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

understand the reality of police and government bureaucracy, the real liabilities of neighborhood political processes, and the fabric of racial and status discrimination.”<sup>41</sup> Although it is true that the personal experiences of black students were invaluable to the classroom environment, it should not be the responsibility of black students to educate their white classmates. This paralleled the trend to blame the inequality of achievement between black and white students on black students’ lack of motivation. Before integration, the achievement gap was attributed to black students’ lack motivation instead of the systematic inequality within the school system. After integration, the responsibility to educate white students was put on black students instead of relying on inclusive classroom materials. Rather, there should have been more focus on reforming the systems that created inequality. This connects back to the early twentieth century education reforms that gave the power to choose which textbooks were used in the classroom to the school board. If the school board was directly responsible to public opinion, then there would have been more pressure to choose textbooks that presented a diverse curriculum rather than putting the responsibility on black students to educate their peers.

On top of the narrative that the achievement gap was a result of lack of motivation, teachers were not equipped or trained to teach students from diverse backgrounds. Middle-class teacher bias and outdated curriculum create a classroom environment that did not reflect the demographic of the student body and therefore minority students did not get an education that fit their needs.<sup>42</sup> According to “The Negro Education”, school social workers and teachers, “have not learned how to understand and inspire low-income Negro youth. The best that is offered is often patronizing acceptance. As a result, both the [black] student and their parents view the

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

school as an alien and hostile place dominated by white authoritarianism.”<sup>43</sup> The only way to correct the disconnect between schools and the community they served was for schools to “go much further to involve the communities they serve. They must bring the parent closer to the school, reaching out to encourage many to join parent associations.”<sup>44</sup> This is an example of why centralization within the school system was bad for neighborhood schools that served a minority population. School administration and teachers needed to be equipped with the skills to care for and educate the groups of people in our country who have been discriminated against since the first slave ship arrived in 1619.

In 1971, phase III of the Providence Plan included advanced staff training on racial and cultural issues in order to better equip teachers to deal with racial issues when they arose in the classroom.<sup>45</sup> However, the proposal undermined the importance of staff training by saying that the failure of teachers and administrators to act according to increased knowledge on racial issues was due to a lack of motivation.<sup>46</sup> The same excuse as to why black students did not perform as well as white students – lack of motivation – was also being used to excuse staff from not using the knowledge they learned from racial and cultural training. This represented a larger trend in relationship structural issues to education inequality; inequality stemmed from systematic issues, but school officials repeatedly put the blame on students and staff rather than fixing the foundation of the education structure.

---

<sup>43</sup> “American Child Growing up Negro: The Negro Education”, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Displacement is often an issue that comes up when cities build new projects such as schools. In 1960, the city proposed to build a new Central Classical High School. There was significant data on the displacement caused by the proposed Central Classical high school project. The land chosen for this project was designated a “blighted” area by the 1956 Redevelopment Act and the project projected to displace a total 152 white families and 160 black families.<sup>47</sup> The number of white and black families displaced by this project was close to equal, although the percentage of white to black families displaced in the surrounding area is unknown. However, the Providence Urban League claimed that being forced to move was more of a financial burden to black residents. As a response, the Urban League proposed classes that would help black families through the relocation process.<sup>48</sup> The goal of these classes was to teach people about the housing market and mortgage process and in turn these classes would make sure that the city lessened the hardships for black residents.

In 1959, a survey was conducted to determine the distribution of wealth and race across the city of Providence. The survey revealed important data that set the foundation for the integration process in Providence Public Schools. The 1950 Census revealed that tract 31 and 37 (Figure 1) were the neighborhoods with the highest black population.<sup>49</sup> According to the table below, poverty was confined to the borders of tract 31, meaning that because the school district in tract 31 had a majority of low-income students, its tax revenue was also lower. The data shows

---

<sup>47</sup> “Redevelopment Plan for Central-Classical”, n.d., Series 1: Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools Central and Classical 1946-54, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>48</sup> “Memorandum” From Wilson to Williams, 1961, Series 1: Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools Central and Classical 1946-54, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>49</sup> “East Side Project: Educational Report”, 1963, Series 1: Box 1: East Side Project: Educational Report, Folder: City Planning Commission 1939-1970, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

that there was de facto discrimination in housing patterns, and this ultimately affected the distribution of classes and racial groups throughout the school system.

Table 1.1. Percent Distribution of Families and Unrelated Individuals by Income in 1959

Census Tract	Total Number	Under \$1000	\$1000-\$1999	\$2000-\$2999	\$3,000-\$3999	\$4000-\$4999	\$5000-\$6999	\$7000-\$9999	\$10000 & over
31	1039	12.8%	8.5%	12.8%	10.6%	14.1%	21%	12.6%	7.6%
32	1242	3.1%	3.6%	5%	10.4%	11%	20.4%	24.2%	22.3%
33	1599	3.7%	5.1%	5.8%	6.9%	11.1%	23%	24.3%	20.1%
34	1486	2.8%	5.6%	4.8%	3.9%	4.4%	3.4%	16.2%	53.9%
35	1552	3.9%	5.0%	5.3%	8.7%	10.9 %	17.3%	17.8%	31.1%
36	911	2.6%	5.2%	7.8%	6.1%	6.6%	17.3%	12.0%	42.4%

Source: Table 1, "Education Committee Report Eastside Neighborhood Council", May 1963, Series 1, Box 1, Folder East Side Project, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

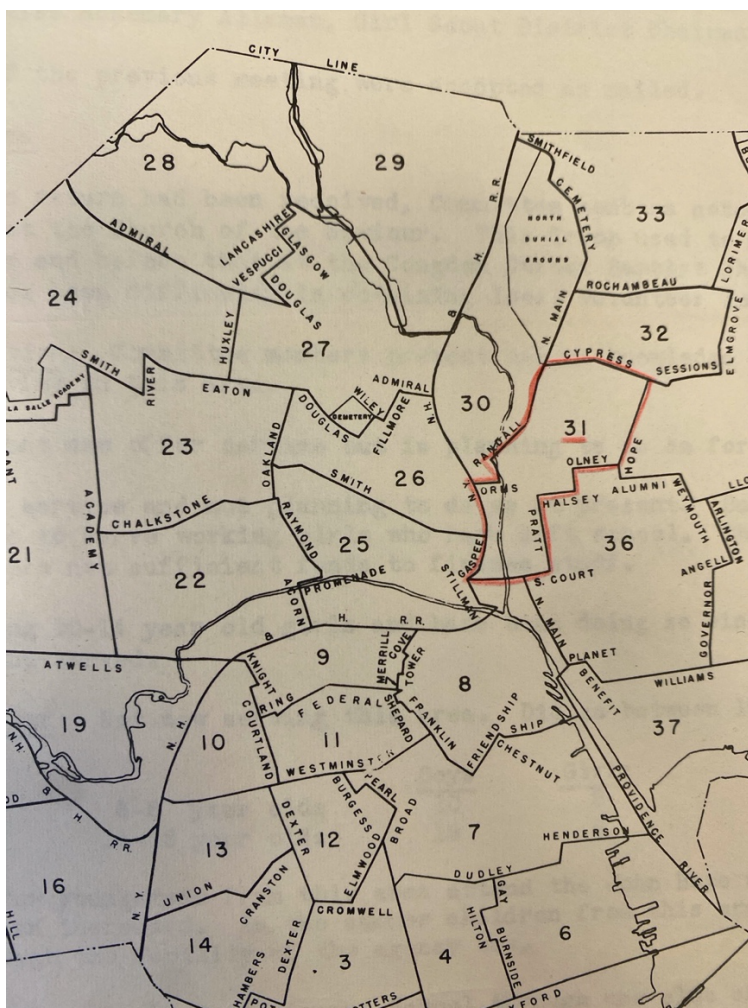


Figure 2.1. Map of Providence Districts, “Education Committee Report Eastside Neighborhood Council”, May 1963, Series 1, Box 1, Folder East Side Project, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

In the 1950s, there were early plans to integrate Providence public schools. These early efforts show the same problems that the Providence Plan faced when implementing the city-wide integration plan. Providence set up three phases of integration starting with the elementary schools and eventually working up to the high schools. The first school to go through an integration process was Fox Point Elementary school in 1954. The goal of the project was to attract and retain students from a wide variety of socio-economic and racial backgrounds. However, when the new school was completed, wealthy families in the district took their kids

out of the public schools and sent them to private schools in the area.<sup>50</sup> The decrease of white students enrolled in Fox Point Elementary school exemplified “white flight”, a larger social trend that took place during the 1950s. Wealthy parents did not see the benefits of sending their children to schools with a diverse socio-economic and racial student body. On the other hand, low socio-economic families did not have the ability to pay for their children to go to private schools and Fox Point became a mostly black school.

Nine years after the opening of Fox Point Elementary school, Providence built a new elementary school for the University Heights area near Brown University, and this project was the official pilot program for the city-wide integration plan. This new school – Lippett Hill Elementary – pulled students from three different districts. Lippett Hill pulled from the Doyle Ave and Jenkins St districts, which served mostly black residents, and the John Howland school district which had the highest percentage of white students in the city.<sup>51</sup> Doyle and Jenkins were the two districts that coincide with tract 31 and 37 (represented in Image 1 and 2) and were both 94% non-white.<sup>52</sup> Bringing these three districts together to create an integrated elementary school was viewed as a step in the right direction however, school officials feared white families would send their children to private school like they did when Fox Point opened nine years earlier. To prevent this, there was a request from outside organizations such as the Providence Urban League to create initiatives for white families to remain in the public schools and deter

---

<sup>50</sup> “Lippitt Hill Problem” newspaper article, n.d., Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools - Lippitt Hill School, Urban League of Rhode Island, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>51</sup> “Lippitt Hill Problem”, League of Rhode Island Collection.

<sup>52</sup> “East Side Project: Educational Report”, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection.

them from putting their kids in private school.<sup>53</sup> However, there is no evidence to suggest that these initiatives were ever proposed or implemented.

In 1971, the City of Providence published its proposed plan for phase III of the integration process. Phase III was the final stage of integration and focused on the four high schools in Providence. The goal of the proposal was centered on the belief that the most meaningful desegregation would occur when “all of the high schools in the system were raised to the highest standards so that the quality of education does not vary according to income or the social status of the given neighborhood.”<sup>54</sup> There were many different groups involved in this proposal including college consultants, state consultants, four high school principals, two elementary school principals and five central office administrators. The committee also had fourteen separate meetings with different parent, school, and community groups.<sup>55</sup> Overall, the committee tasked with drafting phase III was from a wide variety of offices and attempted to include public opinion. One of the most important parts of the proposal is its involvement of the public and this is reflected in the goal to make education more democratic by getting the input of the people.<sup>56</sup> In contrast to the policies of the early twentieth century, when education reform was centered around building up the democracy by investing in the education of the future generations of the voting population. Despite the efforts of the Providence Plan Committee to involve the general public in the planning process, there remained a degree of separation between the committee and public opinion. This is represented in the political cartoon above. This political cartoon published in the Providence Journal in 1967 showed that despite all of the

---

<sup>53</sup> “Lippitt Hill Problem”, League of Rhode Island Collection.

<sup>54</sup> Proposal

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



different organizations and city offices involved in the Providence Plan, the people were still uneducated on the changes going on within the school system (Figure 2).



Figure 2.2. Political Cartoon, *The Providence Journal*, 27 August 1967, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Rhode Island State Archives, Providence, RI.

The Providence Urban League criticized officials working on the integration project for having negative views towards citizen involvement. This comment was first made in 1961 in response to the proposal of a new Central-Classical High School project. In 1956 the Rhode Island Citizen Association for Public Schools (RICAPS) made a recommendation for all appointees within public schools be appointed by the Superintendent and not the school committee.<sup>57</sup> RICAPS justified this recommendation by saying that this was a widely accepted

<sup>57</sup> Rhode Island Citizen Association for Public Schools (RICAPS) Executive Committee Recommendation to the Membership of Rhode Island Citizens Association for Public Schools, 20 December 1956, Series 6, Box 2, Folder 59, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Providence, RI.

policy in educational circles because superintendents had the qualifications to make appointments while the school committee did not. However, this is an example of the centralization of power within the school system because it allowed the superintendent to make appointments without the check or balance from another group and excluded appointments from public opinion. The issue of integration directly affected the people and when positions were appointed by the superintendent rather than the school committee, it created a culture that excluded the general public from the discussion and therefore resulted in a lack of citizen involvement.

The specific data of the Providence Plan provided the racial breakdown of different schools and how the city planned on redistributing students to have the schools reflect the city as a whole. Mayor Joseph A Doorley Jr. adopted the school committee's proposal for integration and in 1969 integrated elementary schools with middle and junior high schools following in 1970. Phase 1 only had a few elementary schools that did not meet the guidelines for integration and the Phase 2 had 100% success achieving the desired racial breakdown in all middle and junior high schools. The goals of integration were determined by a specific percentage range of black and white students at each school. In 1970 there were 1,955 black students and 7,461 white elementary students making an average percentage of 21% black to 79% white, and the school board determined that each school should fall in the range of 11-31% black and 69-89% white. Similarly, the middle and junior high schools had a total enrolment of 1,322 black students and 5,061 white students and they also had to fall in the range of 11-31% black and 69-89% white. In the high schools there was a total enrollment of 1,011 black students and 4,718 white students, and based on this date the percentage breakdown was set between 8-28% black students and 72-

92% white in all schools.<sup>58</sup> In 1970, before the desegregation of high schools was implemented, the four high schools – Central, Classical, Hope, and Mt. Pleasant – had not integrated. Based on the information in the table below, Central and Hope were the most diverse schools while Mt. Pleasant and Classical were mostly all white. This data served as the foundation for redistribution of students across all four high schools.

Table 1.2. High School Enrollment and Race Percentage as of November 16, 1970

Schools	Black	White	Total	Percent black/white
Central High	502	727	1229	42% / 58%
Classical High	78	1292	1370	6% / 94%
Hope High	372	801	1173	32% / 68%
Mt. Pleasant High	59	1898	1957	3% / 97%
Total	1,011	4,718	5,729	18% / 82%

Source: Table 2, “Proposed Providence Plan for Desegregation of Senior High Schools”, 25 November 1971, Box 2, Folder 22, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI. 10.

The city came up with four different options to enact desegregation in the schools. All four of these options involved three different forms of integration. The first form was an open enrollment program which allowed students to choose the school they went to, but each school still had to reserve a certain number of spots for minority students to ensure that 8% - 28% of the

---

<sup>58</sup> “Proposed Providence Plan for Desegregation of Senior High Schools”, 25 November 1971, Box 2, Folder 22, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

student body was black.<sup>59</sup> The second form was a district system where the city divided up into districts with correlating high schools. This plan required black students to be bussed to Mt. Pleasant High because the neighborhood it served was majority white. (That is the reason why it had the lowest percentage of black students.) The last option for an integration system was a feeder plan. A feeder plan assigned a high school to every existing middle school – which at the time were integrated in accordance to Phase II of the Providence Plan. A modified feeder plan allowed for some redistribution of students from the middle school graduating classes to ensure that all high schools had similar representation of the population.<sup>60</sup> The city drafted four options on how to divide up the schools based on their purpose. Option one created four comprehensive high schools meaning that Classical High would no longer be a “special purpose” high school and students would not have to test to get it.<sup>61</sup> Option two created three comprehensive high schools, combining Classical and Central to create a new larger all-purpose high school. Option three differs the most from options one and two because it created four special purpose high schools only utilizing open enrollment. Classical would focus on the arts, Central would be business oriented, Mt. Pleasant would specialize in science, and Hope would focus on graphic arts and technical vocational.<sup>62</sup> The fourth and final option was three comprehensive high schools and two special purpose schools – Classical and a vocational division of Central.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Proposed Providence Plan for Desegregation of Senior High Schools, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 22.

The final decision of the city was to implement option four, that created three comprehensive schools and two special purpose schools and utilized a modified feeder plan which eventually became a straight feeder plan within two years.<sup>64</sup> Under option four of Phase III, the estimated distribution of students by the Providence Plan proposal in 1971 was represented in the table below.<sup>65</sup>

Table 1.3. High School Estimates of September 1971

Schools	Black	White	Total	Percent black/white
Central High	411	1020	1431	28%/72%
Classical High	97	1390	1487	8%/92%
Hope High	395	994	1389	28%/72%
Mt. Pleasant High	157	1772	1929	9%/91%
Vocational-Technical	594	1500	2094	28%/72%

Source: Table 3, "Proposed", 25 November 1971, Box 2, Folder 22, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI. 33-36.

Based on the estimated data for 1971, both Classical and Mt. Pleasant – although they fall in the range of black students making up 8% to 28% of the student, 90% of the student body was white. Therefore, this plan created two mostly white high schools within the integrated system of the Providence Plan. Under option four, Classical High remained a special purpose high school

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 33-36.

for advanced students and because of this it did not follow the feeder plan and instead utilized open enrollment with all students required to test into the school.<sup>66</sup> This only increased the percentage of black students at the high school by 2%. Similarly, Mt. Pleasant High School only increased their percentage of black students from 3% to 9%. In the Proposal, the committee said that because Mt. Pleasant was already mostly white, they would divert the “white population, which is not yet enrolled, but not remove any students presently enrolled.”<sup>67</sup> Instead, the city bussed in tenth graders from two of the junior high schools in order to increase the number of black students. This plan of only bringing in new black students, disproportionately displaced black students and also protected Mt. Pleasant’s status as a mostly white school. In conclusion, Phase III of the Providence Plan set in motion a feeder system, which increased diversity in all the high schools. However, within this plan black students were disproportionately displaced and two of the schools maintained a significantly lower percentage of black students.

The main reason why the Providence plan protected the high percentage of white students at Mt. Pleasant and Classical is because the plan only mandated a percentage range of black and white students at each high school rather than mandating a specific percentage number for each school. This allowed for the city to keep two of the high schools at over 90% white while still falling into the 8-28% range. This is a continuation of the same systematic racism that created segregated neighborhood schools in the first place. Like the 1920s, the country used the rhetoric of making the school system more democratic but in reality, they did not make the schools equal. Besides the demographic of the student body at each high school there were other criticisms of

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 29.

the Providence Plan specifically regarding curriculum and classroom materials that will be discussed further in the next chapter.

In conclusion, the results of the Providence Plan for integration did not equally distribute the black student population between all the school. This is due to the mandated range of 8-28% of the student body had to be students of color. The Providence Plan also failed to reform the centralized education system that was built on the foundation of the neighborhood school structure. Keeping in mind the data from phase III of the Providence Plan, the next chapter will look at the theories behind integration and show how school districts, including Providence public schools, continued to centralize their school systems to implement integration programs. However, in the long run this did not create equality between black and white students and rather protected institutionalized inequality within the school system.

## Chapter Two

### Centralization, De Facto Segregation, and Neighborhood Schools

On a spring day in 1969, Providence Rhode Island, Mrs. Wigginton, the mother of Kenneth Wigginton a student at Mt. Pleasant High School received a call because a fellow student beat up her son. Kenneth's classmate targeted him because he was a resident of the Chad Brown housing project – a historically black affordable housing complex. The student involved shouted at Kenneth, “boys in the Chad Brown Project ain't nothing, especially the black boys.”<sup>68</sup> The student then landed one punch before the fight was broken up. The other student threatened Wigginton saying that if he came to school that next day, he would beat him up again. Kenneth went to school despite the chance of being attacked, and at lunch the student came up to him and beat him up so badly that he had to be sent to the hospital. Many students and staff were bystanders and watched the fight happen. Finally, one staff member broke it up, but only after Wigginton was already injured. At the hospital the police interviewed Wigginton. However, the police came when Wigginton was heavily medicated, so he had no recollection of what he told the police. There was never any follow up by the police or the school and the student went unpunished. This incident represents some of the cultural challenges Providence faced within their schools as they were slowly desegregated. Although schools were being physically integrated, there were social conflicts arising in the classroom. Integration was not just about where students attend school. For the process to be effective it required a classroom environment that taught students how to interact with peers from different social and racial backgrounds. School districts across the country were discussing additional ways to aid the integration process

---

<sup>68</sup> Memo, 13, April, 1969, Folder 66: Mt. Pleasant High School 1969, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.



to prevent conflicts like the one at Mt. Pleasant High School from breaking out. These additional forms of integration were needed to foster long lasting social change between black and white students alike.

The Providence Plan was well under way in the 1960s – elementary schools and middle schools were fully integrated, and phase III – the integration of the high schools was started in the later years of the decade and completed at the start of the 1970s. Reflecting on the story of Kenneth Wigginton, it shows that racism and biases were so deeply rooted into society that simply integrating schools was not enough to bridge to the gap. Placing black and white students in the same classroom was only the first step of integration - something else had to be done to improve the social aspects of integration. For example, curriculum standards could be used to improve the teaching of African American history. This taught students to acknowledge the prejudices within their own community and create both an integrated and inclusive environment. Due the focus on additional forms of integration in public schools, in the 1960s, activists and politicians pushed for new history textbooks and curriculum mandates to improve the quality of education that students were receiving. Required textbook lists and curriculum mandates were an example of the type of centralization that came out of integration in the education system. This chapter will illustrate how the integration of Providence Public schools in the 1960s continued to centralize the education system.

A 1963 study at Brown University researched whether there was a correlation between the levels of motivation of students in relation to their socio-economic background. The findings of the study disproved the belief that low socio-economic students were less motivated than students of a high socio-economic background:

The mean academic motivation of students in a particular high school has little relation to the socio-economic makeup of the school. In other words, there are

roughly as many students with low academic motivation in schools with high socio-economic backgrounds as there are in schools with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>69</sup>

The results of this study aided the process of solving how to prevent social conflict in integrated classrooms. For a long time, it was common thought that low socio-economic schools had lower performance results than high-socio economic schools because the poor and minority students were simply less motivated. This racist narrative was used to blame students for the shortcomings of the segregated education system. However, this study suggests that motivation had nothing to do with performance disparities between schools and the issue instead was to do with inequality between schools. It was no longer acceptable for schools to blame inequality on students, and thus they had to find new ways to improve the performance results of all schools. This narrative provided an example of how improved curriculum standards help combat racist justifications for inequality. When more people had a better understanding of African American history, then they realized that poor minority students are not less motivated but rather have experienced generations of oppression and inequality within the school system.

In 1966, Organizations such as the Providence Urban League, fought for curriculum mandates that required African American history be taught in all Providence schools. William P Robinson Jr, the state commissioner of Rhode Island did “not believe legislation should be passed requiring that Negro history be taught as part of the regular history courses in all Rhode Island Schools.”<sup>70</sup> It is unclear the exact justification for the state commissioner’s opposition, but Mr.

---

<sup>69</sup> The Providence Sunday Journal “Why Are They ‘Underachievers?’” 19, April, 1964, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

<sup>70</sup> “Robinson Against Proposed Bill” Paper, n.d., NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 37: News clippings 1966, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

Coelho, the only black man in the Rhode Island General Assembly at this time “criticized Rhode Island educators for what he called their ‘dismal failure’ to incorporate Negro history in the regular history curriculum.”<sup>71</sup> Robinson did not explicitly oppose the teaching of African American history, but he did not stand for a curriculum mandate. However, Coelho represented the belief that a state mandate for curriculum standards was a necessary to ensure an equal and inclusive education for all students. This is an example of a decision-making body that did not equally represent minority groups – there was only one man of color in the General Assembly at this time. As a result of the lack of representation, the Assembly did not see the benefit of mandating African American history, and therefore it did not pass.

In 1965, an idea was presented for states to come up with lists of required textbooks or approved textbooks. The thought process of requiring the teaching of African American history in every Rhode Island school parallels the idea of approved textbook lists. Textbook lists had the ability to provide students with a better understanding of racial inequality by diversifying the content within the school’s curriculum. In a meeting of the Executive Board of the NAACP Providence Branch in 1965, the board discussed policy regarding which textbooks were used in schools. The executive board wanted “the School Department to procure textbooks to be used in the schools which will include Negro history.”<sup>72</sup> The reason why textbooks were a point of discussion for organizations such as the NAACP was because so many history books “whitewash” history meaning they presented its content from the perspective of the white man and left out the important historical experiences of African Americans. Some textbooks used

---

<sup>71</sup> “Robinson Against Proposed Bill”, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection.

<sup>72</sup> Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting of the Providence RI NAACP Branch, 11, February, 1965, NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 28: Meeting Minutes 1965, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

biased and inherently racist descriptions of African American slave such as saying that African Americans were not capable of reading rather than explaining that it was normal in American slavery to forbid slaves from reading or receiving any formal education.

Providence was not the only city that centralized their education system to combat segregation. New York and Chicago – the two largest U.S. cities in the 1960s – were also creating plans to effectively combat segregation within their own school systems. Each city came up with different ways of integrating their schools, but they all shared the same theme of centralization. Both New York and Chicago addressed economic inequality of schools and tried to integrate and equalize the education system by making sure that all schools had equal funding and resources.

New York City's integration plan targeted financial inequality of schools and proposed to create new sources of revenue for urban schools to supplement the disparity caused by the property tax revenue. The majority of a school's budget came from property tax of the homes in its district. So, if a majority black school served a lower socio-economic neighborhood, then it had significantly less money than a school in an affluent neighborhood. On top of that, urban schools were more expensive to run because of the property value and upkeep of property in the city versus in suburban and rural communities. One of New York City's proposed solutions to this problem was "to finance high rise buildings, with apartments or offices above the schools."<sup>73</sup> In a New York Times article published on July 16, 1967, the President of the New York City Board of Education explained that "the income from the privately owned residential and commercial facilities would be used for debt service on bonds and notes which paid for the

---

<sup>73</sup> New York Times, "Rescue Operation for the Urban School" Fred M. Hechinger, 16, July, 1967, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

school construction.”<sup>74</sup> It is the urban schools that were responsible for the education of most of the minority students in the country. Mr. Howe the President of the Board of Education highlighted “‘the key to any solution’, Mr. Howe hinted, ‘is the realization that the schools alone cannot solve problems that are not educational but civic.’”<sup>75</sup> This quote from Howe highlighted an overall theme of the 1960s; inequality in schools were a large and complex issue and the school system required more corrections than just redistributing students. New York City recognized that simply integrating schools was not enough to fix the issue of inequality, and rather a complete financial reconfiguration of the school system had to take place.

In the Midwest, Chicago proposed to build a new school park complex where most of the students would be bussed to a central campus that contained multiple schools. Funds and resources would be evenly distributed between all schools on the campus – rather than having a neighborhood school system. A newspaper article printed by the Providence Journal in 1967 described the Chicago plan as an assault to the system of neighborhood schools. The article explained that the inequality in the schools was a direct result of the “the rigid system of residential segregation in the city, and the huge size of the two Negro ghettos, where one million people live, would necessarily mean a continuation of segregated education if the neighborhood schools were continued.”<sup>76</sup> A central school campus that all students were bussed to would circumvent the issue of residential segregation that negatively effecting segregation in schools. This proposal meant that the Chicago school system would be centralized, and this would result

---

<sup>74</sup> “Rescue Operation for the Urban School”, Providence School Records.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Providence Journal, “School System of Future?”, 24, August, 1967, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

in less disparity between individual districts. The Chicago plan showed that cities around the country were not simply integrating the schools that already existed, but rather looking at the American school system as a whole and realizing that the racism and inequality in schools was deeply rooted in the makeup and development of cities and their neighborhoods.

The idea of abolishing neighborhood schools was a major point of contention when it came to discussion of education reform. In Cleveland, Ohio in 1964, a boycott took place to protest the school board's decision to protect the neighborhood school system even though abolishing it would have created more equitable schools across the city. In a New York Times article, the United Freedom Movement – which was a coalition of African American advocacy groups – encouraged people to take part in the boycott to show that the African American community wanted to replace the neighborhood school system. Historically, housing was segregated due to racist zoning laws and real estate covenants. In a chain reaction, neighborhood schools reflected racial segregation in housing thus white and black students did not end up in the same schools. So just as cities such as Chicago proposed plans to redesign neighborhood schools, cities like Cleveland experienced reform that protected the neighborhood school system despite the call to centralize the school systems and abolish neighborhood schools.

De facto segregation in housing is the reason why schools were deeply segregated. De facto segregation of schools resulted from settlement patterns of students based on their socio-economic background. It was not deliberate segregation enforced by laws but rather segregation that happened due to a way a system was designed. The cities of Chicago and New York attempted to correct this through their integration plans. A fact sheet collected by the Providence Urban League in 1968 labels de facto segregation as one of the most fundamental issues in society at this time. During this time there was a press on public funds – specifically taxing

structures – which meant that the taxing structure behind neighborhood schools was being investigated.<sup>77</sup> In order to fully integrate schools, cities had to combat de facto segregation by equally distributing taxes among all schools in the district and not based off the property tax of individual neighborhoods. An article posted in the *Providence Journal* in 1964 stated that “if there is de facto segregation, eventually one group is going to get the worst of everything.”<sup>78</sup> The article goes on to say that integration was the only way to “equalize educational opportunity because the parents represented in the stronger political groups would insist that their children continue to get good educations.”<sup>79</sup> It was crucial to understand the connection between school finances, housing, and de facto segregation to be able to fully understand the environment that the integration plans of the 1960s were made in. The integration plans in Chicago and New York targeted the financial inequality caused by de facto segregation. It is human nature for people to reside in areas where they had similarities with their neighbors, but when schools are based off the tax revenue of the neighborhoods that they serve then it is inevitable that within one city, schools will become segregated based on race and social class.

The integration plans of Chicago and New York reflected the ways that cities around the country fought against segregation in their schools. The issues of de facto segregation, financial inequality, and centralization are not unique to Chicago and New York. Providence also worked to find ways to effectively integrate schools and provide equal education to all residents despite

---

<sup>77</sup> Fact Sheet The Changing Politics of State Educational Coalitions by William A Harrison Jr and Michael D Usdan (3), April, 1968, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Series 2, box 29, Folder: 1806, Providence Urban League Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>78</sup> Providence Journal “Asserts Schools Must Integrate” Dr. Myron Lieberman assistant dean for professional studies at RIC, 16, April, 1964, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

<sup>79</sup> “Asserts Schools Must Integrate”, Providence School Records.

their racial and economic backgrounds. The city ultimately settled on an integration plan known as the Providence Plan which was divided into three phases one for elementary schools, middle schools, and lastly high schools.

In 1965 the state government of Rhode Island publicly endorsed integration making it one of its top priorities. In the January session of the State Congress, the body acknowledged the issues of segregation within the school system was a result of de facto segregation in housing. The body also recognized that segregation in housing and education affected the prosperity and growth of the state as a whole, and therefore was not an issue that only affects African American residents but was something that affects everyone.<sup>80</sup> In the minutes of this session a member of the state government said that the state would pass a comprehensive plan to integrate schools and end segregation:

In order to eliminate the discriminatory practices, based upon race or color, religion or country of ancestral origin, and the resulting conditions therefrom, as more fully set forth in section I hereof, the commission and the state department of education are jointly directed to prepare a comprehensive education program, designed for the students of the public schools of this state and for all other residents thereof, calculated to emphasize the origin of prejudice against minority groups, its harmful effects, and its incompatibility with American principles of equality and fair play.<sup>81</sup>

This document showed that the state government was committed to ending segregation in the education system. It was also an example of statewide programs of desegregation that ultimately centralized the education system. Eventually, Providence enforced the Providence Plan to coincide with the statewide integration movement. The state actively tried to implement a

---

<sup>80</sup> “State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation January Session, 1965, Folder 30: Newsletter, Flyers, Notices, and Announcements 1965, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>81</sup> “State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation January Session”, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection.



successful integration plan but as the decade went on and the Providence Plan moved through its three phases the outcome of the desegregation project did not equally distribute students of color throughout the public schools in the city.

Two years after Rhode Island came out in full support of integration the state passed a law to require all history textbooks to include accurate and adequate account of African American history. The Rhode Island General Assembly amended Title 16 on education:

When adopting textbooks, teachers' manuals and other works of reference for use in public schools, for the teaching of courses in civics and the history of the United States and of the state of Rhode Island, the school committee with the approval of the state board of education, shall include only such textbooks, teachers' manuals and other works of reference that accurately portray the role and contributions of American Negroes and members of other ethnic groups in the total development of the United States."<sup>82</sup>

This piece of state legislation was an example of how Rhode Island and Providence were affected by the trend to improve curriculum standards. The amendment to Title 16 is a substantial expansion of power and centralized education at the state level. Rather than having individual schools pick textbooks, now there was a mandated list. This is an example of how centralization could work in favor of equality if the decision-making bodies represented marginalized voices. It is crucial to the integration process that not only students of different races shared the same classroom, but that they also learned an accurate history of African Americans in hopes that the prejudices and biases that fuel de facto segregation were corrected.

One of the most controversial phases of the Providence Plan was phase III, which integrated the high schools in Providence. One of the interesting aspects of integration in Providence is that they integrated one level of education at a time meaning they started with the

---

<sup>82</sup> State of Rhode Island In General Assembly An Act, In Amendment of and in Addition to Chapters 16-1, 16-2 and 16-3 of the General Laws in the Title 16, Entitled Education, as Amended, 1967, NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 45: Planning Notes, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

elementary schools and worked up to the high schools rather than doing it all at once. Because of this, with each phase the approach was alerted and adjusted to address issues that arose in the previous phases. According to the Mayor's Board of Education it was expressed that the city did not want to reorganize the classes that were created by phase II, and there was a focus on keeping the middle school graduating classes together as they moved up to high school. Under Phase III of the Providence Plan white and black students from one middle school would be sent to different high schools.<sup>83</sup> The document from the Mayor's Board of Education quoted a member of the board and said, "I do not subscribe to a plan which for a period of years under the Providence Plan brought Children together, and hopefully taught them how to go to school together, and now turns around when they are going to high schools, into a new environment, and separates them."<sup>84</sup> This quote highlighted an important trend of the 1960s that Providence invested in bringing together students of different racial and socio-economic backgrounds, but also made sure that the environments that they were placed in were inclusive. This was also the motive behind 1967 Title 16 amendment which mandated required textbooks. Not only do students have to be in the same classrooms but there also needs to be a safe learning environment that acknowledges students' differences and teaches the importance of integration and the history of segregation.

The Providence Urban League used their position as a nongovernmental organization in the community to influence the decisions of the city and the school boards. The Urban League was an important character in the narrative of integration because they provided a perspective of

---

<sup>83</sup> "Mayor Board Sound But Not Feeder Plan", n.d., NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 2: New England Regional Conference Workshop, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>84</sup> "Mayor Board Sound But Not Feeder Plan", NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection.

black students and residents which were not represented on the School Board and in the government. In 1966, at a conference for school integration the Providence Urban League presented its list of requirements for an integration plan. The Conference for Negro Leadership wrote a letter to the Superintendent of Providence Schools listing out demands and requirements for integration. The list included, requiring that both black and white students were bussed to new school districts at proportional rates, teachers must be trained to deal with cross-cultural issues – like the incident that happened to Kenneth Wigginton at Mt. Pleasant High School – and that the curriculum be reviewed to ensure that African American history was thoroughly covered.<sup>85</sup> Mandating certain curriculum criteria, teacher training, and the overseeing of bussing were examples of how the Providence Urban League wanted to combat segregation by centralizing education. State- and city-wide mandates were an example of centralization because decisions such as what textbook is used in a history class was no longer at the discretion of individual teachers or the schools but rather was controlled by the city and in some cases the state.

In 1971, after the first two phases of the Providence Plan were enacted and the third phase was in the process of being implemented, the Urban League presented critiques of the integration plan. In a document published by the Urban League it said that the actions taken by the School Committee were not enough and noted that under the Providence plan 20% of black students would be at Classical and Mt. Pleasant and 80% of black students would be at Central

---

<sup>85</sup> "Letter to superintendent Charles O'Connor from the Negro Leadership Conference", 1966, Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools, Providence School Department (1962 - 1972), Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

and Hope High Schools.<sup>86</sup> It is important to note that Classical High School and Mt. Pleasant are the better of the four schools while Central and Hope High were the lowest performing high schools. The Urban League suggested that the school board change the percentages of how many black students were at either school or require that at least five black students were in every classroom.<sup>87</sup> The Urban League offered an outside perspective to integration by directly representing the opinions of the African American population in Providence. The Providence Plan clearly affected the African American population more directly than white residents. The Urban League was a voice for African American interests, and it fought for state and federal mandates.

The Providence Urban League fought for centralization at the state and local level in Rhode Island, and while this was going on there were also actions being taken in the federal government. In fact, there was legislation passed at the federal level that centralized education and took power away from local authorities and moved it up to the national level. In 1965, the *Title I Education Act* passed, and it gave federal funds to schools that served a low socio-economic community. This type of plan not only centralized education at the federal level but it also used compensatory education policy which attempted to compensate for the differences in education levels between white and black students by providing federal aid.<sup>88</sup> Since *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregated schools and inequality in American schools became a federal

---

<sup>86</sup> "High School Desegregation Plan", 25 February 1971, Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools - Providence School Department (1962 - 1972), Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

<sup>87</sup> "High School Desegregation Plan", Urban League of Rhode Island Collection.

<sup>88</sup> "Title 1 Elementary and Secondary Education Act", 11, April, 1965, Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools - Department of Public Schools Background, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

problem and that is why states passed curriculum and quota mandates and the federal government gave funding to public schools that were actively integrating their schools.

Centralization of education was the biggest change to the education system that came out of the integration movement in the 1960s. In the short-term centralization was the best way for school boards, states, and the federal government to ensure the policies of integration were fully implemented throughout the country. However, in the long run it was unclear if centralization was truly the best way to promote equality. In an article titled “A False Dilemma: Should Decisions about Education Resource Use Be Made at the State or Local Level” the author, Thomas B. Timar, discussed the lasting effects of centralization and questioned whether this policy effectively combat education inequality between black and white American students.

There were two research questions that drove this article:

The first question played out at the forefront of education finance policy over the last two decades: Does state control over resources guarantee a more equitable system for students than local control? The second question has emerged as a result of continued disappointment in the academic performance of disadvantaged students: Does state control or district control of resources provide a more effective education? <sup>89</sup>

These questions reflect the trends of the 1960s because the control of resources is connected to who made decisions regarding curriculum, textbooks, and the integration plans in general. Whoever controlled the money, had influence on the entire education system because they have the power to support or stop policy. The control of resources was also reflected the integration plans of Chicago and New York because both cities actively worked to correct resource inequality between schools.

---

<sup>89</sup> Timar, Thomas B., and Marguerite Roza. 2010. ““A False Dilemma’: Should Decisions about Education Resource Use Be Made at the State or Local Level?” *American Journal of Education* 116 (3): 397–422. doi:10.1086/651414. 399.

Timar recognized that the centralization began with the policies of 1970 that followed the integration movement of the 1960s.<sup>90</sup> However, looking retrospectively he questioned whether state and federal control of resources for the education system truly helped the low performing schools that lacked the tax revenue to compete with high performing schools. The foundation of centralization is, “the underlying theory of categorical program funding is that dedicating funds to specific student groups improves vertical equity of inputs (needier students get more resources) toward equity of outcomes (closing achievement gaps).”<sup>91</sup> However, the results of this policy showed that allocated funds to school districts did not proportionately go to the low performing schools that needed the aid. Timar attributed this outcome to the efforts of high performing schools to get more money even when they do not need it:

Some research points out the vested interests that play hard at the district level: parents who lobby for an extra music or technology teacher at their school, labor unions that promote salary schedules and seniority teacher assignment policies that create the effect of paying out higher salaries to more experienced staff who consistently congregate in wealthier schools, and seasoned principals who know how to work the system. If patterns of evident in unrestricted funds indicate what districts would do if more restrictions were lifted, we can't assume districts would expend a larger share of resources on high-need students.<sup>92</sup>

This research showed that education inequality was deeply rooted in the inequality of society. Earlier in the chapter the issue of the neighborhood school proved that education inequality is connected to de facto segregation of housing. Timar's research highlighted that the inequality runs deeper than housing and that people with more money would always be able to use their own personal resources – time and money – to make sure that the public schools that their children attend had more than enough resources to provide an exceptional education. So,

---

<sup>90</sup> Timar and Roza, “A False Dilemma”, 397.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 401.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 402-403.

although in the short-term centralization of education appeared to be a positive step for integration, and was supported by multiple activist groups, in the long run centralization gave more power to high performing schools to maintain their status and took resources from low performing schools.

The type of centralization that Timar talked about in his article is financial centralization because it is aid and mandates that came from the federal and state government that was then handed down to local school boards. However, the state of Hawaii utilizes a different type of centralization. Hawaii is the only state in the country that has a statewide education system meaning that they have one state school board that all public schools fall under rather than having multiple local school systems. The reason why Hawaii has this system is because prior to joining the Union they were a monarchy and the kingdom implemented one public school system and this remained as they became a state. The Education Article of the state's Constitution reads as follows:

Article IX – Education: Section 1. The State shall provide for the establishment, support, and control of a state-wide system of public schools free from secretarial control, a state university, public libraries, and such other educational institutions as may be deemed desirable, including physical facilities therefor. There shall be no segregation in public educational institutions because of race, religion, or ancestry; nor shall public funds be appropriated for support or benefit or any sectarian or private educational institution. Section 2. There shall be a board of education, the members of which shall be nominated and, by and with advice and consent of the senate, appointed by the governor from panels submitted by local school advisory councils to be established by law. At least part of the membership of the board shall represent geographic subdivisions of the State. <sup>93</sup>

The statewide board of education oversees all curriculum standards, and they make the decisions on how to spend the money they receive from the state and the federal government. This is completely opposite of the neighborhood school system that was implemented throughout the

---

<sup>93</sup> Everly, Hubert V. "Hawaii: Equalization through Centralization." *Current History* 41, no. 240 (1961): 108–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45310567>. 111.

other 49 states. Because of this centralized education system Hawaii has found that, “the poorest communities have approximately the same physical facilities, as extensive and as rich of educational program, and as well prepared and paid teachers. The levels of education from kindergarten to high school are available to children of rural districts as quickly and completely as to those in urban areas.”<sup>94</sup> Comparing the centralization of Hawaii’s education system to the type of centralization that Timar discussed in his article showed that not all centralization is bad. However, there is a clear distinction between the good type of centralization and the bad type of centralization. Federal and state aid handed down to local school boards allows for inequality to persist because wealthier schools will always have more resources to use the state and federal mandates to their advantage. However, if all state school systems were regulated by a singular body, then there is no room for inequality between communities because local officials are not able to work the system in favor of their school at the expense of less affluent schools.

The Providence Urban League fought for the centralization of education when they pushed for curriculum mandates and required textbook lists. In theory, this type of centralization is good because it is ensuring that all schools in Rhode Island received the same type of education. However, when comparing Rhode Island’s education system to the current system in Hawaii, curriculum mandates are only effective if the body making the mandates represents all marginalized voices. On the other hand, curriculum mandates also promoted monoculturalism within society. Furthermore, school districts will continue to experience inequality of resources unless there is a singular body at the top dictating how much each school receives. The same can be said for the Chicago and New York plans for integration. Putting schools in buildings that can produce their own income and creating a singular city school campus was a step in the right

---

<sup>94</sup> Everly, “Hawaii”, 113.



direction when it came to equalizing education within school districts. However, if equality is to be accomplished on a larger scale, then there needed to a centralization of education finance while also allowing for a diverse representation of minority groups within the decision-making bodies of the school system.

Stepping back and looking at the 1960s as a whole – in the world of education – there were countless changes made to integrate public schools across the country. From Providence to New York to Chicago, all these cities tried to combat de facto segregation from housing that affected the neighborhood school system. There was also an emphasis on curriculum and textbooks during this time because change makers were realizing that not only did black and white students need be in the same classroom, but that classroom had to be an inclusive environment. What all these types of education reform share is the theme of centralization. Decisions about individual school districts were no longer left up to local officials but were being decided at the state and federal level. Whether or not centralization is the best way to combat de facto segregation is hard to say especially since at the beginning of the 1970s the push for integration that drove the policy in the 60s began to die out. In conclusion, when 1960s education policy reform in Providence is compared to other integration plans and education system across the country, it showed that unless there is one regulatory body distributing resources equally between all schools and also an equal representation of all people, then state and federal mandates are not enough to ensure equality between all schools.

## Conclusion

Starting the story of integration with early twentieth century reforms, revealed the foundation of the education system and how the structure interacted with individual schools. Following World War I, Americans wanted to improve the education system to protect democracy. This was because the country feared foreign influence within the government and wanted to make sure that the future voting populations would be well educated so they could be strong civic participants. This trend of making the school system a patriotic symbol of the United States is encompassed in the tradition of the Pledge of Allegiance which is now performed in almost every school across the country over one hundred years later. Policy makers decided that the best way to utilize education was by making the school systems centralized at the state and federal level in order to enforce universal standards. These universal standards are reflected in curriculum changes and approved textbook lists.

Fast forward to the 1950s, when the Supreme Court passed the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the school system once again experienced centralization as cities and towns across the country worked to integrate schools. Centralization was intended to create equality within the school system. School boards were independent of local schools and represented cities at large rather than by ward, and passed policies that reworked district lines in order to equally disperse the black student population throughout school districts. Specifically, Providence used a feeder system to make sure that each public high school's student body was between 8-28% black. Centralization was also represented in the policies that mandated the teaching of African American history in all curriculums and gave the power to approve textbooks to school boards. During the 1950s and 60s organizations such as the Urban League and NAACP supported the

idea of centralization because they thought it would create equality between different schools. However, the outcomes of centralization did not reflect the intentions.

Inequality was deeply rooted in the foundation of the school system in the United States. Due to de facto segregation in housing and the neighborhood structure of schools, disparities between schools were dependent on segregation in housing. Even though centralization was supposed to equalize all schools it did not make the school system independent of housing, so inequality was still built into the foundation of the education structure. Furthermore, although state and federal mandates and grants were intended to give schools equal resources, affluent schools worked the programs in its favor, and as a result federal and state money was not given to low-income schools which it was intended for. In conclusion, the intended purpose of centralization was to strengthen the education system and make it more equitable for all students despite their socio-economic or racial background. However, the outcome of centralization was that it lacked diverse representation of minority groups within the decision-making bodies of the school system. Centralization also did not address the structural issues of the school system at the foundation. As a result, inequality persisted in the school system following integration and continues to be a problem in public schools across the country.

Hawaii's current education system offered an interesting insight into the role of centralization in schools. Hawaii is the only state in the country to have one school board that oversees all of the schools in the state. This system allows for affluent schools and underperforming schools to receive the same resources from the state. This form of centralization gives equal representation to all schools and thus all marginalized populations within its schools. During the 1960s when schools were integrated in Providence there was not equal representation within the decision-making bodies of the school system, and this allowed for mostly black

students to relocate and ultimately protected the status of Classical and Mt. Pleasant High Schools. The difference between the centralization that took place in the 60s and the form of centralization of Hawaii's schools is that one system works towards equal representation and the other does not.

Diane Ravitch's book "The Death and Life of the Great American School System" argues that the modern-day trend of privatization of schools has allowed private business to influence federal education initiatives which has ultimately protected inequality in American schools rather than combat it. Ravitch writes "the privatizers hope to establish a free market for schooling where people think of themselves as consumers, not as citizens who have obligation to educate all children in their community. They believe that teachers should serve as at will employees, constantly fearful of losing their jobs."<sup>95</sup> Ravitch explains that "the money for choice schools is taken away from the schools that enroll a majority of students, reducing their budgets and causing them to lose teachers, services, and programs."<sup>96</sup> The centralization of the mid twentieth century led to the current education policies being proposed. Privatization creates a free market for education meaning that there is even more competition for resources between affluent and low performing schools.

Modern-day privatization of the school system in the United States follows some of the same reforms that were proposed in the 1920s and again in the 60s, such as universalization of the school system through curriculum mandates. In the Twenty-first century, universalization was presented as standardized testing. However, Ravitch points out that "standardized testing

---

<sup>95</sup> Ravitch, Diane. 2011. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System : How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* Revised and expanded ed. New York: Basic Books. xvii.

<sup>96</sup> Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, xix.

became a multi-billion-dollar industry.”<sup>97</sup> Furthermore “‘high standards’ and rigorous testing’ do not promote equality; instead, they produce high rates of failure for many students and widen the gap between those at the bottom and those at the top.”<sup>98</sup> This shows that after the centralization of the education system in the twentieth century, inequality continued because the structure of the school system was not reformed. Instead, power was given to decision making bodies that were further removed from public opinion. Now, the education system is influenced by private companies hold the power of what is put on standardized tests and what teachers across the country teach their students.

In conclusion, although the research proves that integration of Providence Public Schools was not as successful in creating equity between schools, it does not mean that a decentralized school system would be better. The factors that education reform in the 1960s neglected was the importance of diverse representation within the decision-making bodies of the school system. If the resources of the school system are centralized at state and federal level, local autonomy would still be intact and allow for schools to better reflect the populations that they serve. Education is at the core of American society as it is the institution that prepares future generations to be informed citizens and keeps the country developing and improving. However, if the education system continues to provide unequal educations based on student’s socio-economic and racial classes then the United States will continue to keep minority groups in a second-class position rather than truly promoting equality and freedom for all.

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, xxiii

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, xxiii.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- “American Child Growing up Negro: The Negro Education” by Eli E. Cohen, n.d., Series 2, Box 20, Folder: Education Guidance 1945-1966, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- “Centralized vs Localized Administration of Public Education” by David Snedden, May 1910, Mss 651, Box 4, Folder: School Reports, Providence Public Education Association, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.
- Doorley, Joseph A., Classical High School Graduation Speech, 25 June, 1974, Box 2: Doorley Speeches, Folder: Speeches, Mayor Joseph A Doorley Jr. Papers Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- Doorley, Joseph A., Central High School Graduation Speech, 21 June 1974, Box 2: Doorley Speeches, Folder: Speeches, Mayor Joseph A Doorley Jr. Papers, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- “East Side Project: Educational Report”, 1963, Series 1: Box 1: East Side Project: Educational Report, Folder: City Planning Commission 1939-1970, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- “Education Committee Report Eastside Neighborhood Council”, May 1963, Series 1, Box 1, Folder East Side Project, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- Harrison, William A., and Usdan, Michael D., Fact Sheet The Changing Politics of State Educational, April, 1968, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Series 2, box 29, Folder: 1806, Providence Urban League Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library.
- “High School Desegregation Plan”, 25 February 1971, Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools - Providence School Department (1962 - 1972), Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- "Letter to superintendent Charles O'Connor from the Negro Leadership Conference", 1966, Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools, Providence School Department (1962 - 1972), Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

- “Lippitt Hill Problem” newspaper article, n.d., Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools - Lippitt Hill School, Urban League of Rhode Island, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- “Mayor Board Sound But Not Feeder Plan”, n.d., NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 2: New England Regional Conference Workshop, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- Meeting Minutes, n.d., Mss 214 sg 4, Box 3, Folder: Committee on Textbooks, Minutes 1905-1913, Providence Public School Records (1800-1932), Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.
- Memo, 13, April, 1969, Folder 66: Mt. Pleasant High School 1969, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- Wilson, “Memorandum”, 1961, Series 1: Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools Central and Classical 1946-54, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting of the Providence RI NAACP Branch, 11, February, 1965, NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 28: Meeting Minutes 1965, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- New York Times, “Rescue Operation for the Urban School” Fred M. Hechinger, 16, July, 1967, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.
- Political Cartoon, *The Providence Journal*, 27 August 1967, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Rhode Island State Archives, Providence, RI.
- “Proposed Providence Plan for Desegregation of Senior High Schools”, 25 November 1971, Box 2, Folder 22, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.
- Providence Journal “Asserts Schools Must Integrate” Dr. Myron Lieberman assistant dean for professional studies at RIC, 16, April, 1964, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives.
- Providence Journal, “School System of Future?”, 24, August, 1967, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

“Redevelopment Plan for Central-Classical”, n.d., Series 1: Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools Central and Classical 1946-54, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

Rhode Island Citizen Association for Public Schools (RICAPS) Executive Committee Recommendation to the Membership of Rhode Island Citizens Association for Public Schools, 20 December 1956, Series 6, Box 2, Folder 59, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Providence, RI.

“Robinson Against Proposed Bill” Paper, n.d., NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 37: News clippings 1966, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

Rowe, L.S., “The Relation of the Department of Education to the City Government”, Mss 651, Box 1, Folder 1: School Boards, Providence Public Education Association Records, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI

School Board Survey, n.d., Mss 651, Box 1, Folder 1: School Board Survey, Providence Public Education Association Records, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

“State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation January Session, 1965, Folder 30: Newsletter, Flyers, Notices, and Announcements 1965, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

State of Rhode Island In General Assembly An Act, In Amendment of and in Addition to Chapters 16-1, 16-2 and 16-3 of the General Laws in the Title 16, Entitled Education, as Amended, 1967, NAACP Collection 1916-1965, Folder 45: Planning Notes, NAACP Providence RI Branch Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

“The Financial Relation of the Department of Education to City Government, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science”, March 1900, Mss 651, Box 4, Folder: School Reports, Providence Public Education Association Records, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI.

The Providence Sunday Journal “Why Are They ‘Underachievers?’” 19 April 1964, Providence School Department Clippings (1964-1967), Providence School Records, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

“The Study of the Aspirations of a Selected Group of Negro High School Graduates”, n.d., Series 2, Box 20, Folder: Education High School Survey 1954-1966, Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College Special Collections, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI. 3.

"Title 1 Elementary and Secondary Education Act", 11, April, 1965, Series 1, Box 5: Schools, Folder: Schools - Department of Public Schools Background, Urban League of Rhode



Island Collection, Providence College Special Collection, Philips Memorial Library, Providence, RI.

### Secondary Sources

Anderson, Elijah, "The Devolution of the Inner-City High School.," *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science* 673, no. 1 (September 2017): 60–79.

Dodge Ewert, Cody, "Redefining Citizenship: Curriculum Reform and the Changing Politics of Education in World War 1-Era Butte.," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 67, no. 4 (2017): 58.

Dodge Ewert, Cody, "Schools on Parade: Patriotism and the Transformation of Urban Education at the Dawn of the Progressive Era.," *Journal of the Gilded Age & Progressive Era* 16, no. 1 (January 2017): 67.

Dumenil, Lynn, "'The Insatiable Maw of Bureaucracy': Antistatistism and Education Reform in the 1920s.," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 2 (September 1990): 523.

Everly, Hubert V. "Hawaii: Equalization through Centralization." *Current History* 41, no. 240 (1961): 108–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45310567>. 111.

Fantini, Mario D., "Urban School Reform: Educational Agenda for Tomorrow's America By Mario D. Fantini," n.d., 267–68.

Lagemann, E. C., & Miller, L. M. P. (1996). *Brown v. Board of Education: The Challenge for today's schools*. Teachers College Press., 4–5.

Ravitch, Diane. 2011. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System : How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* Revised and expanded ed. New York: Basic Books. vxii.

Timar, Thomas B., and Marguerite Roza. 2010. "'A False Dilemma': Should Decisions about Education Resource Use Be Made at the State or Local Level?" *American Journal of Education* 116 (3): 397–422. doi:10.1086/651414. 399.