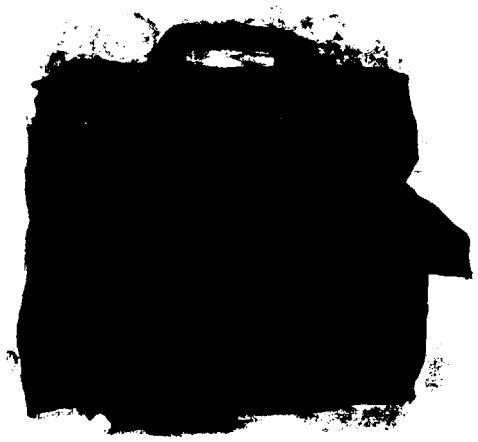

SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN OSSINING, NEW YORK

A STAFF REPORT OF
THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION
ON CIVIL RIGHTS

August 1977

U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is a temporary, independent, bipartisan agency established by Congress in 1957 and directed to:

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- Study and collect information concerning legal developments constituting a denial of equal protection of the laws under the Constitution because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, or in the administration of justice;
- Appraise Federal laws and policies with respect to equal protection of the laws because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, or in the administration of justice;
- Serve as a national clearinghouse for information in respect to denials of equal protection of the laws because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin;
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At the appointment of the Staff Director of the Commission, all activities that contributed to this report were under the general supervision and coordination of William T. White, Jr., Assistant Staff Director, Office of National Civil Rights Issues.

PREFACE

The United States Commission on Civil Rights released on August 24, 1976, its report to the Nation: Fulfilling the Letter and Spirit of the Law: Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools.

The report's findings and recommendations were based upon information gathered during a 10-month school desegregation project. This included four formal hearings (Boston, Massachusetts; Denver, Colorado; Louisville, Kentucky; and Tampa, Florida); four open meetings held by State Advisory Committees (Berkeley, California; Corpus Christi, Texas; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Stamford, Connecticut); a survey of nearly 1,300 local school districts; and 29 case studies of communities which had difficulties with desegregation, had moderate success with desegregation, or had substantial success with desegregation.

Subsequent to the report's release, considerable interest was generated concerning the specifics of the case study findings, which, owing to space limitations in the national report, were limited to a few brief paragraphs. In an effort to comply with public requests for more detailed information, Commission staff have prepared monographs for each of the case studies. These monographs were written from the extensive field notes already collected and supplemented, if needed, with further interviews in each community. They reflect, in detail, the original case study purpose of finding which local policies, practices, and programs in each community surveyed contributed to peaceful desegregation and which ones did not.

It is hoped that the following monograph will serve to further an understanding of the school desegregation process in this Nation.

CONTENTS

I. BACKGROUND

The Community of Ossining

Ossining is located on the Hudson River 31 miles north of New York City. Less wealthy than the surrounding communities, it is best known as the site of Sing Sing Prison, which now bears the name Ossining Correctional Facility.

Ossining's school district, the Ossining Union Free School District No. 1, serves not only the town and village of Ossining, but also parts of the village of Briarcliff Manor, the town of New Castle, and the town of Yorktown. The population covered by the school district is approximately 45,000, including 32,397 for the town of Ossining and 10,000 to 15,000 for the remainder of the district.[1] The minority population is largely concentrated in the town of Ossining. Although the 1970 census states that there are 3,990 blacks in the township,[2] others estimate that there are nearer 4,250--13.1 percent of Ossining's population, and 9.4 percent of the total population in the school district.[3] Although there is no exact count of the Hispanic population, a conservative estimate is that there are approximately 1,000 Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics--or 3.0 percent of the town and 2.2 percent of the school district's total population.[4]

Student Population

As of April 1975, there were 5,136 students in the Ossining school district. Of these, 3,826 (74.5 percent) were white, 1,001 (19.4 percent) were black, 269 (5.2 percent) were Hispanic, and 40 (0.8 percent) were members of other minority groups.[5]

Since 1968, as in other cities across the country, the total school population has declined slightly--by about 300 students. During this same period, black and Hispanic populations grew. Black students increased from 805 in 1968

to 1,001 in 1975, and the Hispanics grew from 83 in 1968 to 269 in 1975. The white population declined slightly--from approximately 4,500 in 1968 to 3,826 in 1975.[6]

Although almost 500 white students left the school system in the 2 years preceding the desegregation of the elementary schools, some school officials and residents said that they did not believe there was any significant "white flight" owing to desegregation.[7] Some persons said, however, that there was some movement within the school district on the part of both black and white parents who wanted their children to attend particular schools.[8]

School System

In 1975 there were four elementary schools (grades K-5), one middle school (6-8), and one high school (9-12) serving the district. All six schools were located within the town of Ossining.

There were 300 professional staff members. Of these 267 (89 percent) were white, 30 (10 percent) were black, 2 (0.7 percent) were Hispanic, and 1 (0.3 percent) was Native American. Three of the four assistant principals in the four elementary schools were black and there was one black serving on the central administrative staff. The number of black faculty had increased by eight since 1970. A Puerto Rican was hired in the 1975 school year. In 1973 the school board president was black.[9]

II. HISTORY OF DESEGREGATION

Background

Because the district had only one high school and one middle school, those schools were considered desegregated; in the early 1970s only the five (one more than at present) elementary schools were racially imbalanced. In 1973 one elementary school was almost 60 percent black and another more than 40 percent. Two were less than 10 percent black. In the fifth school the black student population was about 20 percent, approximately the same as black representation citywide in the student body.

In 1969 Ossining had been singled out as 1 of 54 "target segregated districts" in New York by a State study group known as the Fleischmann Commission.[10] The first steps to desegregate the Ossining elementary schools occurred shortly after the State board of education wrote the school department pointing out the racial imbalance in the elementary schools.[11] The letter arrived at approximately the same time that the United States Supreme Court upheld the State board's first desegregation order, which had been issued to a Long Island school district several years earlier. Ossining was one of several school districts to take the State's informal letter seriously and initiate voluntary plans.

At the request of the Ossining Board of Education, then Superintendent Robert LaFrankie called for a demographic study of the district. As a result of the study, he recommended the closing of one of the five elementary schools and the desegregation of the four other schools through phased steps. The school board supported the proposal to close one school and desegregate the system. In October 1973 the board voted to close the deteriorating Washington School and appointed a redistricting study commission to "create a better sociological, ethnic, and racial balance in the remaining four schools."[12] The 35-member, broad-based citizens' committee, which included

school department staff and representatives from different geographic areas as well as racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups in the city, began work in November 1973 and issued its report in February 1974.[13] Antibusing groups as well as probusing groups were included on the commission. There was, however, no Hispanic representation.

Impetus for Desegregation

Throughout this period the impetus for desegregation came from the school board and its black president, Kadoza Worthy. According to most persons interviewed, school board members and the vast majority of the school district's residents supported the proposal to desegregate. Major differences developed only around the method and the speed with which desegregation should be accomplished.

The white community, though generally supporting desegregation, was divided into several groups. White liberals actively supported desegregation for philosophical reasons. Other white parents, whose children had always been bused to school, accepted it as inevitable. Still others, some of whose children had formerly attended neighborhood schools, actively opposed busing. Several of these parents formed a group known as ACE, Action for Community Education, in opposition to busing.

The black community generally supported desegregating the schools; however, a small number of parents whose children had formerly walked to school opposed busing. Hispanic parents were not visible on the issue and no particular effort was made to involve them.

Business and political leaders were not involved. Black religious leaders held meetings on the issue; however, the white religious community remained largely silent.

Alternate Plans Developed

The redistricting commission developed four separate plans, all of which provided greater racial and socioeconomic balance, yet attempted to the greatest degree possible to assign students living in the same neighborhood to the same school and to minimize the number of students bused. The commission then held a series of meetings--one drawing as many as 500 to 700 parents--to discuss the alternative plans.[14] At this time, a new group, the

Ossining Education Alliance, was formed; the alliance recommended no plan be adopted until further study was done. A similar position had been voiced by Dr. LaFrankie, who believed that the commission had not considered all the possible desegregation models and that additional time was needed.[15]

III. THE REDISTRICTING PLAN

In March 1974 the seven-member school board voted to implement one of the four proposed plans in the fall of 1974. The vote was five in favor with one abstention and one absence.[16] The new redistricting lines divided the entire district into four east-west sectors, each of which included lower income and minority populations along the river in the town of Ossining and higher income white populations in outlying suburban areas. The new plan called for an increase of four buses, but no increases in the total number of students bused, in comparison to the previous year.

The plan selected was that recommended by the redistricting commission and, according to the commission's report, that which received the greatest support at its public hearings.[17] Of the four plans, it was generally considered to call for the greatest change in the districts in the school system. The extensiveness of the plan was one of several reasons why it was recommended by the redistricting commission, whose report stated:

- A significant change in the school populations is needed to create four equally desirable "new" schools.

- Successful integration requires community schools in which all community groups participate; they should not give the illusion of being the special possessions of specific community groupings.[18]

Other reasons cited by the redistricting commission for supporting the plan were that it moved an equal number of black and white students, followed natural and manmade boundaries to a great degree, and maintained neighborhood clusters as much as possible.[19]

Several days after the board's decision, there was a racial disturbance at the high school.[20] Although some

school department staff maintained that the disturbance had no relation to the desegregation plan,[21] other observers said that the situation at the high school may have been related in part to the issue of desegregation of the elementary schools.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

Following the school board vote, the board and the district staff publicized the details of the plan and began to prepare for its implementation the following fall. The board held another series of meetings on the plan. During the spring, students and teachers visited the schools to which they were to be assigned the following fall in order to familiarize themselves with the new schools. Open houses were held at all four elementary schools for the incoming parents and every effort was made to answer all their questions.

A group of staff members in the central administration carefully planned transportation routes and set up safety procedures during the spring and summer. Precautions were taken both for students who were to be bused and those who were to walk to school. For students walking to school, "block houses" where parents were prepared to give assistance were designated in each block throughout the city.

The parent-teacher association developed a complete kit with information for the teachers, students, and parents on the new plan and the block houses. The materials were distributed to all families with children in the system.

At the same time, approximately 30 (24 percent) of the 125 elementary school teachers were reassigned as part of the desegregation plan. Although reassignment was necessary because of the change in pupil assignments, steps were taken to desegregate the facilities of all four schools. According to several persons interviewed, one of the major problems of desegregation was communication difficulty on the part of many white teachers who came from the predominately white schools and were unaccustomed to teaching in a multiracial classroom.[22]

The school department applied for Federal funds for teacher training. The proposal was not funded, so no

training related to multiracial classrooms was offered. In interviews, many teachers and school administration staff members said that they believed such training was an essential ingredient for improving the quality of education and race relations in the schools.

No educational changes were made in the classroom as a result of desegregation.

V. RESPONSES TO THE PLAN

Once the board voted to implement the desegregation plan, the Ossining Citizen-Register, the major daily newspaper in the area, came out in support of the plan and published its details in full. The paper, which had remained silent until the board's decision, took no position on busing except to emphasize the importance of pupil safety. The paper continued to give full coverage to desegregation through the opening of school.

The school board elections in May 1974 were indicative of the larger support for desegregation in the community. A total of four persons, including two liberals and two antidesegregation candidates, ran for two seats. The two liberals, one of whom was black, won. Nonetheless, several persons interviewed said that the board had become slightly more conservative than in the earlier stages of developing the desegregation plan.

An unofficial poll by the Citizen-Register also indicated that a number of Ossining residents did not support the new plan. Of 271 persons polled, replies were evenly divided on whether the elementary school system should be redistricted. The majority did not feel that the redistricting commission did a satisfactory job; however, of those plans proposed, a small majority did favor the plan that was selected.[23]

Other than the school board elections, the antidesegregation groups took no actions to hinder the process. There were no general demonstrations, community meetings, or threats to keep children out of school.

VI. EFFECTS OF THE PLAN

In the fall of 1974, the elementary schools opened under the new redistricting plan without incident. The plan called for reducing the black student populations at two schools (from 59.2 percent to 30.2 percent at Park School and from 40.5 percent to 21.6 percent at Claremount) and increasing the number of blacks at the other two schools (from 2.7 percent to 19.2 percent at Brookside and from 6.7 percent to 24.4 percent at Roosevelt).[24] Because of population shifts over the summer, the black population at Park School remained slightly higher than the desired percentage. The total number of students bused increased only slightly (from 1,996 in 1973 to 2,217 in 1974)[25] and the total cost of transportation for the public schools declined (from $292,839 to $254,080).[26] Although statistics on students bused by race are not available, it is generally accepted that a slightly larger percentage of minority students were bused under the desegregation plan. Park School, which had the highest percentage of minority students, was formerly a neighborhood school, and the reassignment of Park students required busing of a larger number of students who had not been bused previously. The average length of the bus ride, 30 minutes, was the same as the previous year.

Attendance remained high throughout the year with all four schools reporting attendance at 93 percent or higher.[27]

At the time of this case study no data were available on changes in pupil achievement or motivation as a result of desegregation. However, in the spring of 1975, the Title IV General Assistance Center for Equal Educational Opportunity at Columbia University's Teachers College began an indepth evaluation of the desegregated system. Information on that evaluation was not available.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Ossining Union Free School District No. 1, which desegregated its elementary schools in a well-planned, violence-free manner, has experienced over the last few years strong positive leadership from the superintendent, the central administration, and the school board. There was also careful planning and citizen participation in the development of a plan to bring about a desegregated school system. Many persons interviewed said that they believed that the desegregated schools would provide a better education for their children, but only a few people were optimistic about improved race relations in the community.

Continued interest in the desegregation effort was demonstrated by the school board's establishing, at the superintendent's recommendation, six subcommittees to evaluate the desegregation process and to determine whether further redistricting was necessary. These subcommittees worked in the following areas: parent participation; buildings and equipment; racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic balance and redistricting; race relations; staff and professional services; and quality of education.

While enthusiastic about the successful implementation of the desegregation plan, members of the school board, administration staff, and community also spoke of the need for improvements. Of primary concern to those interviewed are: (1) racial imbalance in four elementary schools caused by changes in residential patterns during the first year of desegregation; (2) the potential for resegregation in the classroom; (3) the underrepresentation of blacks and Hispanics on the school staffs; (4) the lack of bilingual programs in the system for students of Spanish origin; and (5) the need for adequate support services such as counseling and special education.

Notes

1. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Characteristics of the Population, New York, 1970 Census of Population, table 33, p. 218 (hereafter cited as 1970 Census).

2. Ibid.

3. This figure is derived from the 1970 census, plus an estimated 8 percent minority undercount. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR), Counting the Forgotten (April 1974).

4. The USCCR estimates, based on the 5 percent Hispanic school population, that Hispanics make up between 2 and 3 percent of the general population. The 1970 census reports that there are 706 persons of Spanish origin and descent in the town of Ossining (1970 Census, table 102, p. 471).

5. Ossining, N.Y., School Department, report, Apr. 10, 1975.

6. Data supplied by Ossining, N.Y., School Department, January 1976.

7. Yvonne Foglia, PTA member, Roosevelt School, staff interview, Ossining, N.Y., Feb. 12, 1976; Harry Davenport, former chairman, Redistricting Study Commission, staff interview, Ossining, N.Y., Feb. 25, 1976. Staff members of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights interviewed school officials, civic leaders, and private citizens in Ossining in January, February, and March 1976.

8. Jean H. Catalano, teacher, Brookside School, staff interview, Ossining, N.Y., Jan. 27, 1976.

9. Data supplied by Ossining, N.Y., School Department, January 1976.

10. Albany, N.Y., Department of Education, Report of the New York State Commission on the Quality, Cost, and Financing of Elementary and Secondary Education (also known as the "Fleischmann Report"), "Racial and Ethnic Integration," chap. 4 (1972).

11. Ossining Citizen-Register, Nov. 14, 1973.

12. Ossining, N.Y., School Board, resolution, Oct. 30, 1973.

13. Ossining, N.Y., Redistricting Study Commission, "Report of the Redistricting Study Commission of Ossining Union Free School District" (February 1974) (hereafter cited as Redistricting Commission Report).

14. Ossining Citizen-Register, Jan. 22 and 23, 1974.

15. Dr. Robert LaFrankie, former superintendent of schools, Ossining Union Free School District No. 1, staff interview, Ossining, N.Y., Mar. 4, 1976.

16. Ossining, N.Y., School Board, resolution, Mar. 4, 1974 (hereafter cited as March 4 Board Resolution).

17. Redistricting Commission Report, p. 21.

18. Ibid., p. 22.

19. Ibid., p. 23.

20. Ossining Citizen-Register, Mar. 16 and 17, 1974. Articles briefly describe closing of the high school following disturbances on Mar. 14, 1974.

21. Charles Pittignano, principal, Ossining Middle School and Stanley Toll, principal, Ossining High School, staff interviews, Ossining, N.Y., Mar. 4, 1976.

22. Robert Lockwood, principal, Brookside Elementary School, staff interview, Ossining, N.Y., Jan. 27, 1976; Ruth Sherman, school psychologist, School Department, staff interview, Ossining, N.Y. Jan. 26, 1976.

23. Ossining Citizen-Register, Feb. 22, 1974, p. 13.

24. March 4 Board Resolution.

25. Ernest Ascherman, in charge of health and transportation, Ossining School Department, telephone interview, March 1976.

26. Harold Morris, assistant superintendent in charge of finance, School Department, staff interview, Ossining, N.Y., Jan. 28, 1976.

27. Peter Ramuno, attendance officer, School Department, staff interview in Ossining, N.Y., Jan. 28, 1976.

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