

The story of Prince Edward County schools – Prince Edward County schools handout

“History never needs much space for its decisive battles. Prince Edward County, an area of only 356 square miles, a farming community of at the most 14,000 people, may be the crucial battleground in the fight to integrate the public schools of the South.”

- *Journalist and civil rights activist Marvin Caplan, 1961*

Background

Even as Virginians, you may never have heard the story of the great civil rights battles that took place in Prince Edward County over 50 years ago. Virginia, unlike the other southern states that make up the “Deep South”, was relatively free of the outright violence that typically caught the eye of the press. Events like the murder of Emmett Till and the Montgomery Bus Boycott garnered much more media and political attention. Instead of using violence, Virginia embarked on an insidious and racist decade-long legal battle to keep schools segregated- despite the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* that banned segregation in the nation’s public schools.



1951: The fight begins

In 1951, Prince Edward County teenager Barbara Johns led her fellow African-American high school students in a walkout to protest the inequality of segregated schools. She then started a lawsuit that became part of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case that eventually ended school segregation.

1954: *Brown v. Board of Education*

The Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed segregation in public schools, yet the change would not happen overnight and would be met in many places with violence. In Virginia, the policy of Massive Resistance, a policy declared by U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr. of Virginia to unite other white politicians and leaders in Virginia in a campaign of new state laws and policies to prevent public school desegregation, sent a message to the entire state: no integration anywhere. In 1955 the Supreme Court issued a second ruling that declared the implementation of desegregation to occur “with all deliberate speed.” During the next four years schools across the state, forced by the federal directive, began token integration- meaning a few black students would attend all white schools, but largely schools would stay almost completely of one race. This way Virginia schools were not technically disobeying the Supreme Court’s decision and could still operate and receive funding. However, in Prince

Edward County, they would go about fighting the law in a different way; they would simply close all their public schools.

1959: Prince Edward County closes its public schools

Excerpt from Christopher Bonastia's book "Southern Stalemate: Five Years without Public Education in Prince Edward County"

"Although whites had been warning for five years that they were perfectly willing to close county schools, many Prince Edward blacks could not fathom that the county would resort to such extremes. Calvin Nunnally was 10 years old in 1959. In his recollection, "it became clear the first few weeks in August the schools were not going to reopen, and all the summer there was always talk. The schools would open...something would come up maybe in City Council meetings, or Board of Supervisors meetings that would give a ray of hope, but it would fizzle out and now we're into September and the schools weren't open." Rita Moseley, 12 years old when schools closed, described her surprise at the closings:



The first I heard [about the closings] was from [my classmates]. Some of the other kids were saying that schools were going to be closed and, of course, I didn't believe it and a lot of us didn't believe it, until it actually was....But I lived right behind one of the schools that I went to, the elementary school, and that school was chained, the doors was chained, so I knew then (laughs)—that was a wide awakening right there.

For two long years nearly 3,000 black students would have no public schools to attend and no one to champion their cause. Their options were to try to attend schools outside the county by sending their kids to other towns, move away all together from Prince Edward County, or simply not go to school at all. Most, because of limited means, chose the last option as their public schools sat empty and locked. Meanwhile, white students attended the new private school Prince Edward Academy. In the beginning, local legislators used public school funds to go to the private school, but that was quickly outlawed. To get around the law Prince Edward County changed its tax laws so now locals paid almost nothing on property taxes so they could afford the cost of the private school for their students.

1961: The Federal Government gets involved

Not three months after John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as President of the United States and his brother Robert F. Kennedy was appointed attorney general, the president focused his executive and legal powers on the crisis in Prince Edward County and a motion was filed in a federal district court by the Justice Department. A month later, Robert F. Kennedy would make a highly publicized speech to a

crowd of law students at the University of Georgia that would alert the nation on what was happening in Prince Edward County, Virginia.

“The conflict of views over the original decision in 1954 and our recent move in Prince Edward County [Virginia] is understandable. The decision in 1954 required action of the most difficult, delicate, and complex natures, going to the heart of Southern institutions ...

It is now being said that the Department of Justice is attempting to close all public schools in Virginia because of the Prince Edward situation. That is not true, nor is the Prince Edward suit a threat to local control.

We are maintaining the orders of the courts. We are doing nothing more or less. And if any one of you were in my position you would do likewise, for it would be required by your oath of office. You might not want to do it, you might not like to do it, but you would do it.

For I cannot believe that anyone can support a principle which prevents more than a thousand of our children in one county from attending public school - especially when this step was taken to circumvent the orders of the court.

Our position is quite clear. We are upholding the law. Our action does not threaten local control. The federal government would not be running the schools in Prince Edward County any more than it is running the University of Georgia or the schools in my state of Massachusetts.

In this case - in all cases - I say to you today that if the orders of the court are circumvented, the Department of Justice will act. We will not stand by or be aloof. We will move.”

In their first move against Prince Edward County the Justice Department asked that Virginia be prohibited from providing support to any public school until Prince Edward reopened theirs. Civil rights defenders across the country cheered the bold move including the nationally distributed newspaper the Chicago Daily Defender, “the Justice Department finally mustered enough courage to try to smash this lone pocket of ludicrous resistance.”

The move outraged Virginian segregationists and Senator Byrd claimed that the move saw “to punish an entire State because of the action of one county displeases the United States Attorney General.”

Unfortunately, the judge would deny Robert Kennedy’s request on grounds that because there were no public schools open in Prince Edward County, there has been no know violation or defiance of the law to desegregate schools. Further, the judge felt that there must be a better way to force the re-opening of the schools without disrupting the education of all Virginia’s schoolchildren and it was up to the Justice Department to come up with solution. The Justice Department had lost the first round, but Robert F. Kennedy was far from giving up hope or from keeping quiet.

Time passed but the case would not die and continued appeals from the Department of Justice kept the case alive. In 1962, a judge of the U.S. Fourth Circuit of Appeals granted the Justice Department

permission to plead their case, but he too shut the case down arguing that no law had been violated and there was no need to hold hostage the education of all of Virginia's students.

In 1963, three more judges from the Fourth Circuit of Appeals found that "the Fourteenth Amendment did not require states to operate public schools- only that public schools in existence not practice racial discrimination. No public schools meant that no discrimination existed. Similarly, closure of schools did not violate equal protection of the law, since all residents on the county had the same options for public education- none," writes Prince Edward County School expert Christopher Bonastia.

1963: The Free School Association of Prince Edward County

Meanwhile, the Kennedy administration had decided that the time for waiting to win the battle legally was over and drastic measures had to be taken to get the black students of Prince Edward County back in school. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy continued to speak out against the violation against equality, comparing Prince Edward County to other countries in the world that were ideologically twisted.

We must achieve equal education opportunities for all our children regardless of race. Segregated schools cause educational as well as psychological difficulties and the resulting drain on our greatest resource--the spirit and knowledge of our children--must be eliminated.

We may observe, with as much sadness as irony that outside of Africa, south of the Sahara where education is still a difficult challenge, the only places on earth known not to provide free public education are Communist China, North Vietnam, Sarawak, Singapore, British Honduras--and Prince Edward County, Virginia.

But while the situation at Prince Edward County or the violence which occurred last fall in the University of Mississippi may capture the headlines, the far more important fact is that an increasing number of southern communities, local officials, and citizen groups are working effectively to desegregate their schools peacefully and without fanfare. Last year, for example, 60 southern school districts were desegregated without any difficulty whatsoever.

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It should be our goal to make it possible for any child who wishes to do so to enter the same public schools on the same basis as they are made available to children of another race.

The Justice Department brought together an all-star team of lawyers, including William vanden Heuvel, who was on special assignment from the Justice Department to work on the Prince Edward County case, and representatives from the federal government to find a solution to the problem. In the end, they decided to establish "a model school system for educationally deprived children," open to all students

regardless of color and funded by private donations. It was no easy task getting the support of the county school board to agree, but vanden Heuvel was rewarded by his tireless efforts and the plan continued to slowly move forward. Here vanden Heuvel recalls the challenges he faced trying to get the school open in two months:



“This was the first federal school set up since the Civil War in the South. There was a tremendous amount of interest in how we were going to go about it. I...had an office in the Justice Department and in Prince Edward County, and we began looking for teachers and for money. I had to raise well over a million dollars to finance the project. It was really quite a leap of faith here. You know, you had the school buildings, then you had to have the teachers, then you had to have the students, then you had to have the money to put it all together. And you needed a shield of the establishment to prevent the hate-mongers from shooting through it.”

Starting with President Kennedy, donations came in from all over the country to help the Free School Association cover costs for one year of school. Foundations from around the country contributed as well as teachers. Under intense pressure from the Kennedy administration they met their financial goal. Now they faced finding enough teachers and administrators that would take on the challenge of trying to educate a student body who had missed four years of education. Dr. Neil V. Sullivan was appointed as the superintendent for the Free Schools and he shaped the system to meet the needs of these unique students. Classes were team taught and there were no grades. Instead, students progressed at their own rate and caught up individually as soon as they were able to move on. The student to teacher ratio was 12-1 in the high school and 22-1 in middle and elementary school. The condition of the high school, Moton High School, was excellent minus the dust that had accumulated over the four years, but the other buildings were in ruin as Prince Edward County had never intended to reopen them and trash in the wastebaskets and debris in the toilets left an unholy stench. In a shocking turn of events, the private all-white school, jealous of the funds raised to open the Free Schools, actually petitioned the foundations who had contributed to the Free School for money – they saw no reason why they should be left out in the cold. Needless to say, they were rejected by every group they asked for money.

As opening day drew closer, Sullivan sent out open invitations for teachers from all over the country to come to Prince Edward County for the year. Over half the teachers were from Virginia but others came from all over the country including Maine, California, Wisconsin and Georgia. Some were granted time from their own school system to go teach in Prince Edward and others showed up without a guarantee that their jobs would be there for them once they returned.





On Monday, September 16, 1963, the Free Schools opened and greeted 1,578 students, including four white students. The new student body took their education very seriously and in one instance refused to go home when the water supply from their school broke leaving them with no bathrooms. The students volunteered to just go in the woods rather than miss more school. The students faced an immense challenge catching up. Many of them had little instruction or opportunities to practice skills while the schools were closed for four long years. Many students and teachers got to school early, stayed late and even met on the weekends to

try to catch up. Meanwhile, both students and staff were harassed on a regular basis by white supremacists but nothing would stop them from getting their education.

In November 1963 President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and his death hit the students of the Free Schools particularly hard. The students thought of him as more than a president, said Sullivan; “ He was our sponsor and our friend.” When Robert Kennedy visited the schools in May 1964 the students delivered the 9,994 pennies they had raised to go to his brother’s future presidential library. After years of working to open the schools, he finally was able to see it come to fruition. The schools were not perfect and many students never fully recovered from the loss of four years of education, but on June 15, 1964, the Free Schools graduated 23 high school students. In the course of the year another battle was won and on May 25, 1964, after Prince Edward County's public schools have been closed for the previous five years, the U.S. Supreme Court in Griffin v. School Board of Prince Edward County rules that the county has violated the rights of students to an education and orders the Prince Edward County schools to reopen. And in the fall of 1964, they did.



Source: [Southern Stalemate: Five years without public education in Prince Edward County, Virginia by Christopher Bonastia](#)