

The story of Prince Edward County schools – Closing the schools

Teacher: *I want you all to close your eyes for a minute and imagine that it is the last day of school. Feels great right!? Picture yourself walking out of that last class, the sunshine on your face and a whole summer of fun ahead of you. Think about all the fun things you are going to do, who you're going to see, date and hang out with. Maybe you will go on vacation, go to the pool, see family, get to sleep in and stay up late because there is NO school the next day. Take in all the wonderful memories that you'll have from a whole summer of carefree days.*

Now I want you to start thinking about those last few weeks of summer before you go back to school. What a huge range of emotions you go through. You're sad to see summer go, but excited to see who's going to be in your class or classes. You might be a little nervous about what kind of teacher or teachers you'll have that year, but you're also filled with the hope that starts out every new school year that it's going to be a great one.

*Now I want you to remember all those emotions you felt about going back to school, the good, the bad, and the excitement. **And now I want you to imagine that you are a black student in Prince Edward County in 1959 and that you have just been told that the county has decided to CLOSE its public schools completely instead of integrate them.** The parents of the white students set up "private" schools for their children to attend, but you and the 1700 other black children had nowhere to go. And your school wasn't closed for a week or a month or a year; it stayed closed for the next four years.*

Ask students for their reaction.

Now ask students to read the reaction of students from 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."

Adults, too, were caught off-guard by the closings. Vanessa Venable, who was teaching in PEC's black schools in 1959, described Farmville in the 1950s as "a very pleasant place, a very congenial place with apparently no discord anywhere. Everything was moving very smoothly."

The school closings tore away those assumptions:

"We were all very, very upset. We didn't think that we were living among people who would be that mean. We expected something, but not that drastic a move. We thought that the white people in Farmville were all friendly neighbors. But when this happened we began to wonder whether we were living among neighbors or whether we were living among enemies."