



Celebrating 50 Years: Integration

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JUNE 16, 2014 - On Dec. 26, 1969, teacher Wrenn Conrad was home during the school system's holiday break. When she turned on the evening news, she learned that teachers throughout Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools would be transferred the following semester in order to more fully integrate the faculties of all the schools.

"Nobody knew a thing until they announced it on TV," Conrad said. "We were just sitting there and it was supper time."

At that time, Conrad was teaching at Southwest Junior High School. The transfers were made during the second semester by exchanging people who had similar teaching positions. Although Conrad wasn't transferred, her husband at the time was. He taught history at North Forsyth High School and was swapped with a teacher at Atkins High School.

"They switched places," she said. "That was the second semester that year."

Each principal was allowed to keep a certain percentage of key teachers. All other teachers were placed in a pool.

“They were chosen to some degree by lots,” said Bob Blevins, who was then the school system’s assistant superintendent for elementary schools.

After the holidays, 500 teachers were transferred to another school. “There was a lot of heartache in that,” said John Shore, who was the principal at Mineral Springs Elementary School at the time.

It was hard on teachers, and it was hard on their students.

At the time of the transfers, Kenneth Simington, now the school system’s assistant superintendent for instructional and student services, was in the third grade at Carver. “After Christmas, we had a new teacher and she was white,” Simington said.

She was quite nice, he said, but it was unsettling to get a new teacher in the middle of the year. Plus, he really liked his original third-grade teacher. “The first teacher was one of my favorite teachers. She was warm and inviting.”

In retrospect, some people thought that the teacher transfer proved to be as traumatic and disruptive in its own way as the busing of students that followed in 1971 to dramatically increase the level of integration.

First, a bit of history.

Before the city and county consolidated for the 1963-64 school year, all of the black students in the county school system attended Carver, which had grades 1 through 12.

In Winston-Salem, integration had begun to a small degree in 1957, when the city - along with Charlotte and Greensboro - began admitting blacks to schools that had been all-white in the wake of the Supreme Court ordering the desegregation of all public schools in 1954. In 1957, Gwendolyn Yvonne Bailey became a student at Reynolds High School through a “freedom of choice” plan. Mostly, though, black students in Winston-Salem went to black schools and white students went to white schools.

A 1981 school system report on integration noted that most blacks in Forsyth County lived within the city limits of Winston-Salem in the 1960s - primarily in the eastern, northern and southern parts of the city. Out in the county, less than 10 percent of the population was black.

After consolidation, efforts were made to increase integration, including inviting black students to join the program for gifted students at Brunson Elementary School. Another experiment in integration began during the 1964-65 school year.

Albert Jordan, who went on to graduate from Atkins High School in 1965, was one of seven black students from Anderson and Atkins who were invited - along with eight white students from Gray, Griffith, East and North Forsyth high schools - to take a machine-shop class at Reynolds High School. Although Jordan thought that was odd at the time, given that there was a school system trade school just across the street Atkins, it was only years later that it dawned on him that the true purpose of establishing the class at Reynolds was as an experiment in integration. When he later got in touch with the teacher, Jack Driver, Jordan said, Driver confirmed that was the case.

Jordan also thinks that all the students were chosen in part because they had no behavior problems. Anyone walking into the class would have found seven black students on one side of the room and eight white students on the other, Jordan said. Over the course of the year, students became more comfortable with each other.

During those days, all-black schools did not have the same resources as all-white schools, Jordan said. "We got a lot of second-hand academic materials," he said. Desks, science equipment and textbooks all might be used.

And several years before those 500 teachers were transferred in order to more fully integrate the faculties, there was a more modest experiment in integrating the faculties. Daisy Chambers, who had been teaching at all-black North Elementary, was one of 25 teachers in the school system sent to other schools in 1964. She was assigned to Clemmons Elementary.

She was reluctant to go not because of concerns about being the first black on the faculty but because of the distance she would have to drive, she said. "I had always lived very close to the school where I worked. Clemmons was like another world." When she asked not to go, she was told to give it a month. If it was still a problem, they would work something out. Frank Morgan was the principal at Clemmons then. After a month, she was happy to stay. "After a month with Frank Morgan, I was in heaven. I got along with the teachers fine."

By 1967, about 9 percent of black students were attending a once all-white school. By 1969, the school system had about 50,000 students - 72.5 percent were white and 27.5 percent were black. About 2,100 of the black students were attending a predominately white school. About 200 white students were attending a predominately black school. And 45 of the school system's 66 schools were integrated to a greater or lesser degree.

Some schools had become fairly well integrated. Jay Wise, then the principal of Wiley Junior High School, said that was the case with Wiley, which took students from the neighborhoods around it.

North Forsyth was another school that was fairly well integrated when Ron Pannell, who is now the school system's safety manager, went there as a sophomore for the 1969-70 school year. The year before, he had attended an all-black school - Paisley Junior High School.

At the time, Pannell said, there was racial tension out in the community. At North Forsyth, that tension sometimes manifested as fights among blacks and whites. Pannell and his fellow football players didn't fight, though. When they joined the football team, the coaches told the players, "If you want to play football at North Forsyth, you will not be in a single fight." If they were, they would be thrown off the team.

When federal courts ordered the faculties to be integrated in 1969, they also directed the school system to create a plan that would more fully integrate students throughout the school system. After studying options that would keep the 6-3-3 organization of elementary, junior and high schools in place, administrators determined that a more radical plan was necessary for schools to more fully reflect the racial makeup of the county. It's worth noting that, when a student count was made in December 1969, only 7 students in the school system were Hispanic.

Unlike the relative simplicity and smoothness of consolidation, integration was complicated, Blevins said. “That took a lot of reorganization...We had a court order. There was no question about whether it would be done or not.”

Administrators created a 4-2-2-2-2 plan with elementary schools that had grades 1 through 4 (kindergarten wasn't added to the school system until the 1974-75 school year), intermediate schools (grades 5-6), junior high schools (grades 7-8), high school schools (grades 9-10) and senior high schools (grades 11-12). For the most part elementary, junior high and senior high schools were located in predominately white parts of the county, and intermediate and high schools were located in predominately black parts of the county.

Because of where schools were located throughout the county, extensive busing would be necessary to make the plan work.

“Busing was the chief tool used to desegregate the schools,” said Bob Severs, who was the school system's director of federal funds. “There was a lot of resistance toward busing.”

Some resistance came from the fact that, in general, black students would be bused away from their neighborhoods for eight of 12 years, and white students would be bused for away from their neighborhoods for four of 12 years.

Chambers, who was still teaching at Clemmons, met with parents of black students who would be bused from the Cleveland Avenue neighborhood in Winston-Salem out to Clemmons. “Some of them had never been to Clemmons,” Chambers said.

She also talked with Clemmons teachers who would be going to schools in predominately black neighborhoods. One in particular was upset about being transferred to Carver, Chambers said. “She had never been in a situation where she was a minority.”

At the beginning of the 1971-72 school year, the school system put the plan in place.

“Almost every student in the school system was affected by it,” Shore said.

A.C. Larrimore, who had been the principal at Kernersville Junior High, became principal of Anderson, which was converted to a 9-10 school. Given the circumstances, Larrimore said, the “plan was probably the best that could be done at the time.”

Preparing for the reorganization presented significant challenges. For starters, people in the school system's transportation department had only five weeks to organize the system used to bus students to schools.

In a 1981 newspaper article that looked back on integration, Morris Hastings, who was the school system's director of transportation in 1971, was quoted as saying, “It was a nightmare.”

The 4-2-2-2-2 plan meant that another 10,000 students were added to the number of those already receiving bus transportation to school and that students living on a single street might be going to five different schools. In the end, transportation came up with 8,000 stops on 700 routes.



Reorganizing the schools also required moving textbooks, furniture and equipment from one school to another. Richard Gizinski was science teacher at Hill Junior High School then, and Leo Morgan, the assistant superintendent for maintenance, called Gizinski and asked him whether he wanted a summer job overseeing the crews that took care of moving everything.

The school system rented six trucks and put two men on each truck. The crews might go to an elementary school to pick up all the fifth-grade textbooks that were now needed at a 5-6 school. When they arrived, they might find that nobody was sure what needed to be moved where.

“It was a mess,” Gizinski said. Or a principal might question whether they had the necessary authority to move things. A quick call to Morgan, who had a military bearing, Gizinski said, would take care of that. After talking to Morgan, the principal would say, “You take whatever you need.”

As the crews learned what needed to be where, things went more smoothly. “We were given six weeks to make the move,” Gizinski said. “We had it done in 4½ weeks.”

Even the 4-2-2-2-2 plan didn’t establish a system in which every school reflected the makeup of the county. The white/black percentages ranged from 82 percent white and 18 percent black at Hill to 59 percent white and 41 percent black at Petree.

Harry Underwood, who had been principal at Dalton Junior High School, became principal of the 9-10 school John F. Kennedy High School. Administrative assignments were made, Underwood said, so that, as much as possible, a black administrator was paired with a white administrator. That was the case at Kennedy where Underwood, who is white, worked with an assistant principal, Henry Jones, who was black.

“We had to learn from each other,” Underwood said. “The person who got educated most was me.”

The 4-2-2-2-2 plan also brought yet more shuffling of teachers. Toni Bigham, who retired in 2011 as the assistant superintendent for elementary schools, said that, in those days, a teacher might just get a letter during the summer saying she had been reassigned. That was the case with her. She had been teaching fourth grade at North Elementary School. The summer before busing started, she received a letter saying that she would be teaching at Diggs Elementary School.

At Diggs, many of the white students being bused there had been going to Griffith Elementary School, she said. They liked Griffith just fine and simply couldn’t understand why they couldn’t keep going there.

It was hard on parents in the neighborhood, too, said Annie Hairston, who was a teacher at Diggs then. When Diggs was all-black, most students walked to school each day, and, often, the parents walked with them. Many of those parents didn’t own cars, Hairston said. When their children started being bused elsewhere, the parents had difficulty getting to the new schools, which significantly reduced the level of parent involvement at the new school.

Because many of the white parents were resentful about having to send their children to Diggs, some of the white students mirrored their parents’ resentment, Hairston said.

Simington lived in a neighborhood near Carver, where he had been going. “I walked to school with my friends,” he said.

Now, he had to climb on to a bus each morning and ride to Ibraham Elementary School. “It was a world away,” Simington said.

The cultures of the white and black students at Ibraham were quite different. The white boys played baseball. The black boys played football. Later, when Simington went to Walkertown, which was a 7-8 school, the school elected two student body presidents - one white and one black. “They wanted to make sure everybody felt included.”

And, when Simington went to East Forsyth High School, there were two homecoming queens - one black and one white.

Students who were already riding a bus often had a longer bus ride. Diane Wooten, who was a student then, said that being transferred from Northwest Junior High School to Hanes Junior High School meant that she had a significant bus ride each day.

Among older students, there were some fights early on. Often, said Vic Johnson, the fights stemmed from the stress of being in a new and uncomfortable situation. Now a school board member, Johnson had been transferred from Paisley to North Forsyth to work as an assistant principal with Principal Julian Gibson. "After we got them calmed down and they began to realize that people were concerned about them, they did very well," Johnson said.

In many ways, athletics served to bring students together, Johnson said. That process had already started with consolidation, when schools that were predominately black or white began playing each other. "The athletes really integrated the school system," Johnson said.

At North Forsyth, winning the state championship in football in 1971 helped, Pannell said. That served to bring members of the student body together.

Reorganization also highlighted the discrepancies between how well-equipped all-black and all-white schools had been.

Mike Britt, who is retiring as executive director of the school system Centers for Exceptional Children, said that he saw busing for integration bring better equipment to formerly all-black schools. His first year of teaching in 1970-71 was at Paisley, which was all-black then. When busing began in 1971, Paisley became more than 50 percent white. Many students lived in the Buena Vista and Sherwood Forest neighborhoods, and the school received better equipment and other support, he said. "It was a totally different experience."

Hairston had a similar experience at Diggs. Once Diggs became 70 percent white, it received all sorts of new educational materials. Before, she said, "we didn't know what new books were."

For the most part, the transition went fairly well, Larrimore said. A big part of that was Superintendent Marvin Ward's leadership, he said. Teachers also played an important role.

"We were really blessed with some wonderful teachers," Larrimore said.

The 4-2-2-2 plan meant that, in general, making connections was harder for everyone. After leaving elementary school, a student was at any particular school for only two years, principals, teachers and other staff members didn't have the time to get to know students as well as they did with three-year junior and senior high schools.

"You didn't have the kids long enough," Underwood said.

"Kids didn't get a chance to develop much school loyalty," Wise said.

Students didn't have the chance to get to know each other as well either because they weren't necessarily going from one school to the next with the same students. When they went on to, say, senior high school, they might find students from other schools there with them.

Two-year senior high schools also made for really large graduating classes. Larrimore, who moved on to what was then Parkland Senior High after two years at Anderson, recalls graduating classes of 700, 800 and even 900. “You basically lost half your student body each year,” he said.

With the addition of kindergarten in 1974, the organizational structure stayed in place through the early 1980s. During that time, the overall number of students declined and the percentage of blacks in the school system increased to about 38 percent. For the 1984-85 school year, the current organizational system was adopted. Elementary schools became kindergarten through grade five, middle schools became grades 6 through 8 and high schools became grades 9 through 12.

With the new organization, elementary and high schools were in predominately white areas, and middle schools were in predominately black areas so, in general, black students were riding the bus for 10 of their 13 years in school.

Janet Doub, a retired teacher who was also teaching during the consolidation and busing years, said that the 1984-85 reorganization took some adjusting was well.

In 1995, the school system began its choice plan, which gave students and families the option of choosing among schools in a zone. Chambers said she understood why people wanted that. “It was a very difficult time for many people,” she said. “They wanted to get their children off the buses.”

We will look at the choice plan in a separate story later this summer. In our next story, we will look at some of the programs that help make Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools special.



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