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## CHAPTER V

### THE STATUS OF EDUCATIONAL DESEGREGATION IN FLORIDA

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It should be stated quite candidly at the outset that there has been no desegregation in the public schools of Florida. One might say that we are still in the talking and "planning" stage. Further, there is reason to believe that there will be no spectacular or unusual rush into the waiting arms of integration. It cannot be said, however, that Florida's position has been, or is, one of "wait and see." Some definite and important steps have been taken in the direction of evolving a *modus operandi*.

Florida's first attempt at circumventing the Supreme Court of the United States came in the form of a legislative bill. The bill, sponsored by Senator Charley E. Johns, former acting governor, instructs county school boards to assign each child to the school "to which he is best suited." Moreover, it makes the determinations of the local boards conclusive of the issue. In addition to its primary purpose, the preservation of segregation, the bill makes possible the use of study groups, special legal counsel to assist local boards, and surveys to channel the local school boards in the rendering of decisions. At first glance, one might think that the bill is simply intended to ease the road of desegregation, but the statements of the sponsor and its supporters negate any such thought. The bill is designed as an out-and-out anti-integration piece of legislation. Some persons who have carefully examined the bill point

out, however, that the segregation preservists may have out done themselves. As *Southern School News* noted in its issue of July 6, 1955, the loosely worded and multifarious provisions of the bill just might "give local school boards all the legal authority they need to carry out the Supreme Court decision."

Negro parents in four of Florida's sixty-seven counties filed petitions to enter its public schools on a non-segregated basis in September. There was no action taken except referral to study committees. The petitions were not followed by court action. Attorney General Richard W. Ervin seemed to have correctly interpreted the status of things in September when he said: "They [Negroes] apparently realized such radical departure from established social tradition must be approached slowly." In any event, there was no flood of petitions and no rush to sign the four actually submitted.

Four Air Force bases located in Florida—Eglin, Tyndall, MacDill, and Patrick—desegregated their schools under federal direction during the month of September. The Air Force organized its own educational system after it became evident that the local school boards were not going to end segregation in the systems administered by the State. Negro pupils enrolled at Tyndall and Eglin without incident. A Negro teacher was employed at Eglin Air Force Base. No Negro students, reportedly, sought to

enroll at MacDill or Patrick. In the latter case, officials contacted stated that failure of Negroes to enroll was merely coincidental.

The Florida Supreme Court backhandedly acknowledged, in October, that the principle of segregation must, of necessity, give way to the United States Supreme Court's desegregation position. The case specifically before the court was the one of Virgil Hawkins, forty-eight year old employee of Bethune-Cookman College. Mr. Hawkins has been seeking admission to the University of Florida Law School for more than six years. The case had gone to the United States Supreme Court, and was remanded to the Florida court for a decision in line with the Federal court's integration ruling. The Supreme Court of Florida held that the Board of Control, the State's administrative agency in charge of higher education, could not refuse to admit Hawkins to the University of Florida Law School. It added, however, that the admission of Hawkins presented "grave and serious problems affecting the welfare of all students and the institutions themselves, and will require numerous readjustments and changes at the institutions of higher learning." The Court said to the Board of Control—show cause why Hawkins should not be admitted to the University of Florida Law School. (At this writing no directive has come down from the State Supreme Court that Hawkins should be denied admittance because of race, although a subsequent United States Supreme Court decision directed that Hawkins should be admitted.)

Shortly after the Florida decision in the *Hawkins Case*, the Board of Control conducted a survey for the

purpose of determining whether or not serious problems might be encountered should Negroes be admitted to the University of Florida. The survey was to ascertain the attitudes of selected university groups toward desegregation. The groups included in the survey of the three Florida universities, Florida A and M University, Florida State University and the University of Florida, were: students, parents, faculties, alumni, and health service employees.

The writer of this article feels that a general discussion of the above mentioned survey will shed much light on the whole problem of desegregation in Florida. Accordingly, said discussion will be undertaken at this point. Whatever the reader's reaction, it is felt that he will agree that Florida's approach, in this respect, is truly a novel one.

Questionnaires were drawn up and sent out to the groups previously listed. Approximately fifty-nine (59%) per cent of the persons receiving questionnaires returned same, from a total of 57,322. There can be no doubt that this represents a better than average return on a survey of this type. As indicated by the proportionately high rate of return, more than ordinary interest was manifested in the subject matter of the questionnaires. It is interesting to observe that many persons took additional time in order to fortify their positions—for or against integration of the university system—by enclosing printed data or by adding personal remarks. Some persons estimate that as many as fifty (50%) per cent of the white participants wrote additional comments.

The following questions were asked

of all students at both white universities:

1. "Which statement best describes how you feel about the admission of Negro students to the white state universities of Florida?"

Some 20.44 per cent of the replies said that Negro students should be admitted immediately; 43.21 per cent said that they should be admitted after a reasonable period of preparation for integration; 14.25 per cent said that their admission should be delayed as long as legally possible; 21.07 per cent said that they should not be admitted under any circumstances; 1.03 per cent failed to respond to this question.

2. "If Negroes attend the same class with you, do you think you would make an effort to be friendly to them?"

Some 7.15 per cent indicated that they would make such an effort; 55.49 per cent indicated that they would stay in the class and treat the Negroes just as they would any other students; 7.56 per cent said that they would continue in class but would attempt to discourage Negroes from attending; 17.67 per cent said that they would stay in the class but would not sit next to one of them; 9.61 per cent said that they would drop the course; 2.16 per cent failed to respond to this question.

3. "What would be your reaction to having a Negro in the same swimming class?"

Some 50.80 per cent said that they would accept the Negro student as they would any other student; 4.99 per cent said that they would go out of their way to make the Negro students feel at ease; 16.13 per cent said that they would continue in the class

but avoid the Negro student; 21.50 per cent said that they would drop the course; 4.54 per cent said that they would try to make it so unpleasant for the Negro that he or she would drop the course; 2.04 per cent made no reply to this question.

There were other questions on this part of the survey but space limitations prevent a detailed summary of same. The other questions are as follows:

1. "If Negroes are admitted to white state universities which statement best describes the thing you would be most likely to do?"
2. "What would be your reaction if, upon returning to school, you found you had been assigned to room with a Negro student?"
3. "What would be your reaction if a Negro came into the university cafeteria and got a tray of food?"
4. "What would be your reaction if, upon attending a social event, such as a dance, you found Negro students present?"

We move now to that part of the survey which dealt with the attitudes of the white parents at the two state-supported universities. Replies of the parents of students who reside outside the State of Florida are included. It should be noted that there was no significant difference between the replies from the parents of the total group and the replies of parents of in-State students. The percentages indicated below are based on a return of 52.95 per cent of the parents at both universities. Some of the questions and replies are as follows:

1. "Which statement best describes the way you feel, in general, about the admission of Negro students to the white State universities of Florida?"

Some 7.79 per cent of the parents said that they should be admitted immediately; 22.45 per cent said that they should be admitted after a reasonable period of preparation for integration; 24.28 per cent said that they should be delayed in admission as long as legally possible; 44.06 per cent said that they should not be admitted under any circumstances; 1.42 per cent failed to answer this question.

2. "What would you want your son or daughter to do if he (or she) found a Negro in the same class after he (or she) had returned to school?"

Some 2.17 per cent said that they would want their son or daughter to make an attempt to be friendly to them; 37.57 per cent said that they would want their son or daughter to stay in the class and treat the Negroes as they would any other student; 18.54 per cent said that they would want their son or daughter to stay in the class but not sit next to one of them; 25.57 per cent said that they would want them to drop the course; 9.10 per cent said that they would want them to try to discourage Negroes from staying in the class; 7.05 per cent failed to reply to this question.

3. "What would you want your son or daughter to do in the event he (or she) was in a swimming class and there was also a Negro student in the class?"

Some 25.57 per cent said that they would want them to accept the Negro as they would any other student; 2.34 per cent said that they would want them to make the Negro student feel that he or she was accepted; 15.94 per cent said that they would want them to continue in the class but avoid the Negro student; 46.40

per cent said that they would want them to drop the course; 3.37 per cent said that they would want them to try to make it so unpleasant for the Negro that he or she would drop the course.

The other questions submitted to the parent group were similar to the ones submitted to the students. Some 88.03% of the faculty members at the University of Florida and Florida State University (white schools) replied to the questionnaires which were sent. This was the highest percentage of return of questionnaires of any group surveyed. Some questions and replies were as follows.

1. "Which of the following statements best describe the way you feel about the admission of Negro students to the white State universities?"

Some 37.84 per cent of the replies of faculty members said that they should be admitted immediately; 44.46 per cent said that they should be admitted after a reasonable period of preparation for integration; 12.55 per cent said that they should be delayed in admission as long as legally possible; 3.66 per cent said they should not be admitted under any circumstances; 1.49 per cent did not respond to the question.

2. "Do you think you would be willing to continue teaching at your university if Negroes are admitted?"

A majority, 92.94 per cent, replied that they would; 4.53 per cent said that they would, but only until they could find a position elsewhere; 1.66 per cent said "NO" they would not; 0.87 per cent failed to answer this question.

3. "If Negroes are admitted to your university, what would be your atti-

tude toward the employment of administrators and faculty members who are Negroes?"

A third, or 32.26 per cent, said that they would accept them as faculty members in every regard; 44.20 per cent said that they would not object if they are qualified by training and experience; 13.60 per cent said they would tolerate them if they were not too closely associated; 4.71 per cent said that they would remain at the university only until they could find a position in a college where Negroes were not admitted; 1.39 per cent said that they would resign when this occurred; 3.84 per cent gave no reply to this question.

Other questions asked the faculties of the two white universities need only to be listed in this article. For purposes of information, they were as follows:

1. "On what class level do you think it would be best to admit Negro students at First?"
2. "If Negroes are admitted to your university, what would be your attitude toward participation in social and recreational activities where they are present?"

The 52.92 per cent of the alumni of the two white universities who responded to the questionnaires answered the basic question—"Which statement best describes the way you feel, in general, about the admission of Negro students to the white State universities of Florida?"—as follows: 12.43 per cent of the replies from alumni said that they should be admitted immediately; 31.05 per cent said that they should be admitted after a reasonable period of preparation for integration; 23.34 per cent said that they should be delayed in

admission as long as legally possible; 31.46 per cent said that they should not be admitted under any circumstances; 1.72 per cent gave no reply to this question.

One question in the survey was directed to the employees of the student health services of the two white universities: "Which of the following statements best describes the way you feel about dealing with Negro students in the event of desegregation?"

Some 51.67 per cent of those responding said that they would not object at all; 38.33 per cent said that they would take care of them but that they would not like it; 10 per cent said that they would resign and seek employment elsewhere.

Of the students sent questionnaires at the Negro university (Florida A and M), 53.82 per cent responded. Pertinent questions and replies were as follows:

1. "What would you do in the event State universities are open to all races?"

Fully 70.36 per cent of the students said that they would continue at Florida A and M University; 9.14 per cent said that they would transfer to Florida State University; 12.18 per cent said that they would transfer to the University of Florida; 4.46 per cent said that they would transfer to another institution; 3.86 per cent failed to answer this question.

2. The students were asked if they thought they could adjust satisfactorily to classroom, cafeteria, dormitory and swimming pool situations if they attended a white university.

An overwhelming majority, 97.92 per cent of those answering, said they thought they could adjust to the class-

room situation; 97.03 per cent said they thought they could adjust themselves to the cafeteria situation; 93.98 per cent said they thought they could adjust themselves to the dormitory situation; 91.01 per cent said they thought they could adjust themselves to the swimming pool situation.

3. "If the State universities are open to all races and you remain at the Florida A and M University, would you object to other races attending the university?"

Some 96.21 per cent of the students said that they would not, 2.67 per cent said that they would; 0.52 per cent noted that they were uncertain; 0.60 per cent failed to respond to this question.

The important question asked of the parents of students at Florida A and M University—"Do you as parents of students at the Florida A and M University object to the admission of other races to that University?"—was answered as indicated below.

88.58 per cent replied that they did not object; 6.03 per cent of the parents said that they did object; 5.04 per cent stated that they were uncertain; 0.35 per cent made no reply to this question.

The faculty, Alumni and Health Service Employees of Florida A and M University chorused an almost 100 per cent majority in favor of integration on all levels, and in all situations. The slight difference of opinion related only to "immediate" integration or integration "after a reasonable period of preparation". The overwhelming majority cast their lot with immediate integration.

A study of the information presented above tells us some significant things very definitely. They are: (1) Parents

of the present students at the two white universities are not entirely opposed to the admission of Negroes; (2) Parents of the present students at the Negro university are not opposed to desegregation of the schools; (3) Faculty members at the two white universities are not opposed to the admission of Negroes; (4) Faculty members at the Negro university are in favor of integration; (5) A large percentage of students at the two white universities are in favor of more than gradual desegregation; (6) Students at the Negro university almost unambiguously welcome integration; (7) A large percentage of the alumni groups at the two white universities is not seriously opposed to the admission of Negro students; (8) The alumni group at the Negro university favors desegregation; (9) The health service employees of all three universities are willing to serve in desegregated situations; (10) The large majority of the faculty members of all three universities would accept qualified members, regardless of race, as colleagues; (11) It appears unlikely that there would be any violence in any of the three universities should desegregation or integration become the rule; (12) The three universities, in terms of their component parts, are as ready for compliance with the United States Supreme Court decision as anyone could reasonably expect.

The writer feels that other observations should be made about this Board of Control survey. First, the percentages are all probably low because not all of the students, faculty, health service employees, and parents participated as invited. Second, it does not seem irrational to assume that just about everyone who is strongly

opposed to desegregation responded. It follows, therefore, that the indifference or lack of response of the rest indicates lack of opposition. Third, and most amazing, is that the survey reveals that a majority of the white parents would not remove their sons and daughters even if the latter should be assigned to live with a Negro. In addition, the overwhelming majority of white students would not plan to leave under comparable circumstances.

Florida, which apparently had an official policy of gradual acceptance of integration, switched supposedly to active resistance in March. This verbal change was brought about by two situations— a “slam-bang” political campaign and the second ruling of the United States Supreme Court in the *Hawkins Case*.

Governor Leroy Collins, in an obvious attempt to silence critics seeking to unseat him said:

“The Progress we are making in this state and the position we have maintained, has been envied by other Southern States. So far we have maintained segregation without a great many of the disorders and problems which have arisen in other states. We are just as determined as any Southern state to maintain segregation. We will do our resisting with cool heads and without emotional furor or riotous excitement”.

The Supreme Court of the United States ordered the Board of Control to admit Hawkins to the University of Florida College of Law. In its *per curiam* opinion, the court said:

“As this case involves the admission of a Negro to a graduate professional school, there is no reason for delay. He is entitled to prompt admission under the rules

and regulations applicable to other qualified candidates.”

It should be observed at this point that Governor Collins was virtually elected in an unprecedented first primary victory. Despite his campaign statements on the maintenance of segregation, it is generally felt that he is a moderate. With respect to Hawkins, he will not be eligible for admission to the University of Florida before the Fall. There is a general belief that he will enroll without incident.

The Florida *Sentinel*, a Negro weekly, probably put its editorial finger on the general status of desegregation in Florida. When it discussed the governorship campaign, the *Sentinel* said:

“Governor Collins, like all the candidates, believes in segregation. Long before General Lowry announced his one plank segregation candidacy, Mr. Collins stated his views on the subject and has shown along with other state officials, an effective way to prevent integration without hysteria. They have erected such an excellent stalling machine that Negroes have been completely baffled and have failed to file a single suit to enforce the Supreme Court decision.

“In fact Negroes have remained silent as they watched with joy the extraordinary school structures going up for their children as the result of the integration decision. Negroes didn’t get anything under the ‘Separate but Equal doctrine;’ maybe we’ll get ‘Equal’ facilities under the integration decision.”

In closing, I would like to bring to the attention of the readers a sort of capsule summary of the happenings on the desegregation front in Florida.

There has been no concerted effort



in this state to intimidate Negroes through and by means of "economic sanctions." There has been a deterioration of good race relations because of a rather "nasty" political campaign, but no signs of violence appear on the horizon. A few Negroes have applied, in recent months, for admission to the white universities, but suits have not been filed seeking to enforce same. The Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Councils have had no real success in exploiting the segregation issue. In a few isolated instances Negroes have been admitted to previously all white labor unions. Two beaches, Delray and St. Petersburg, were recently ordered to integrate by the federal courts. The golf course in Pensacola has been opened, by court order, to both races. The public transportation system has effected no visible change since the ruling indicating that intrastate segre-

gation is illegal. The students of Florida A. and M. University and the colored citizens of Tallahassee have instituted a bus boycott similar to the one in effect in Montgomery, Alabama; but it remains to be seen how long it will be supported or even necessary. The whites of Tallahassee are generally amenable to arbitration. All in all, Florida is still an infant in the infant phases of desegregation.

I would suggest that next year (1956-57) will provide a more accurate map for the highway of desegregation. Negroes and whites are just waking up to what desegregation really means. With the political campaign behind and the United States Supreme Court in front, there is reason to believe that desegregation might become a reality in the future. Right now, it is primarily a hazy dream—in Florida, anyway.