



BROWN VS. BOARD 50 YEARS LATER

'Children have changed our community' Lee official says

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Before Lee County was stirred into a cultural melting pot, railroad tracks literally split Fort Myers into two halves.

White families lived west of the tracks; black families generally resided on the east side.

Skin color – not money, education or status – determined where you lived, where you shopped, where you prayed and where you went to school. Segregation in Fort Myers was just as unyielding as Birmingham, Ala., Jackson, Miss., or any other city in the Deep South.

Pat McCutcheon vividly remembers growing up in segregated Lee County, forced to attend the Williams Academy and Dunbar School.

"Those were the only schools in Lee County for blacks at that time," the 83-year-old said. "That's where we had to go because the law of the land didn't allow us to go to Fort Myers High, which was for whites."

Monday marks the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, which declared that separate schools for white and black students were inherently unequal. A year later, in 1955, the court ordered that states desegregate schools "with all deliberate speed." That didn't happen in Lee County, though.

In August 1964, 10 years after the *Brown* ruling, Dunbar High student Rosalind Blalock sued the school district after she was denied access to all-white Fort Myers High. The federal court approved a plan in February 1965 to desegregate schools within five years, and in August of that year, Alva Elementary enrolled one black student and Edison Park Elementary registered two black children.

Lee eventually integrated all of its public schools in 1970, but it wasn't until 1999 that a federal judge finally declared Lee was offering an equal education to white and black students. Federal oversight stemming from the Blalock case officially ends on July 12.

Lee County was a holdout in the civil rights movement, slow to assign black students to previously all-white schools and slow to treat all schools equally regardless of their location. Riots, protests and hatred marred desegregation efforts, but Superintendent James Browder believes children a generation ago had a much different attitude than today's youth.

"Children, by and large, dealt with what was occurring in their community based on what their parents felt," said Browder, admitting that he was appalled at Lee's racial climate after moving from West Virginia in 1972. "What we have today is youngsters that have gone to school together their whole lives and have a multicultural friendship. The children have changed our community and how we all think."

Separate Schools, Unequal Education

As a youth, McCutcheon trailed his father to informal meetings of the mind, where a group of influential black businessmen would chat about various issues. One of those was the mounting frustration at the discrepancy between schools for white and black students. White schools were aesthetically pleasing, adequately funded and teachers were provided ample educational materials. By contrast, black schools were often held in private residences, churches or rented buildings.

Black leaders, including McCutcheon's father, pooled their money to help the Lee County Board of Public Instruction finance a spacious two-story school for black students. Dunbar School was built from the same floor plan as all-white Edison Park, drawing the eye of black students around Florida when it opened in 1927.

Despite the modern facility, all was not equal inside Dunbar School. Students received hand-me-down textbooks and band uniforms only after white schools discarded their editions and clothing. Teachers often had to create their own instructional materials because the school had limited finances. Black children were forced to walk to class even though white students were bused to school.

Dunbar's situation in the 1920s and 1930s was not unique. Inequities had been occurring since the first formal school for blacks opened in 1887, and the discriminatory treatments continued for more than seven decades. Lee County documents at least 10 black public schools during that period, but some lasted just a few years.

Longtime Fort Myers resident Ann Knight, a 1950 graduate of Dunbar High, returned to Southwest Florida after attending college in South Carolina. She taught in local schools before, during and after integration, retiring in 1995 after 40 years in education.

Knight said the inequities in Lee County weren't subtle, but blatant. School buildings in black neighborhoods were not well-maintained and summer rains took their toll. Teachers had to improvise lessons because they lacked necessary classroom materials. Textbooks contained numerous markings from previous students and important pages often were missing.

"The books were raggedy and outdated," said Knight, now a Fort Myers city councilwoman. "They said 'some day we'll get to the moon,' and it had already happened."

Despite those obstacles, Lee County's all-black schools have turned out an impressive resume of graduates: Ida S. Baker, the first black to receive an appointment within the Florida Department of Education; Isaac Anderson Jr., the first black county judge; and Veronica Shoemaker, the first black to serve on the Fort Myers City Council. Dunbar High graduates also became Lee County's first black pharmacist, professional athlete, bank president and other firsts.

"What made the difference was the dedication of black teachers," Knight said.

Same Schools, Unequal Education

Although several Lee County schools were starting to diversify their enrollments in the late 1960s, full integration throughout the district did not occur until 1970. Many whites in the community did not support the forced integration, inciting numerous confrontations that often turned ugly.

School Board member Bob Chilmonik still clearly remembers hostility and intense hatred when public schools began integrating. He recalls white parents standing across the street from Lee Middle vowing to withdraw their children from school if black students were permitted to attend. He graduated in 1972 from Fort Myers High, where race riots frequently disrupted class and police dogs were summoned to help keep the peace. Black students, representing less than 15 percent Fort Myers High's enrollment, were bused off campus after some of the uproars.

"It still stuck with me all these years," Chilmonik said.

Robin Miller also attended Fort Myers High from 1969 to 1972 and remembers when a helicopter landed on campus during one uproar. Instead of waiting for the chaos to subside, she hopped in her car and drove home.

"It hurt us as youngsters seeing people not getting along," she said. "Maybe they couldn't deal with the diversity."

Miller returned to Fort Myers High as a teacher in 1976 and says the school's racial climate had changed for the better. Students seemed to have learned how to get along in each other's company and there were fewer disturbances initiated by non-students.

Some of the area's worst race-related incidents were created by adults infuriated that local schools were forced into integration. Fort Myers High became the center of public controversy even though other schools also were diversifying their enrollments.

"Oftentimes adults are the creators of the problem, and children just look at it and move forward," Browder said.

Cape Coral High Principal Charles Dailey, who moved from Miami to Lee County 19 years ago, said the area's calm, small-town atmosphere also meant it was behind the times in the civil rights movement.

"There were problems you had to deal with in big cities in the late '60s and early '70s, but we were just starting to deal with them here — severe problems of discrimination, racism and cynicism," Dailey said.

The racial divide began to shrink, Dailey said, when School Board members hired James Adams as superintendent in 1990. Adams began to mend fences and build trust within the minority community as well as develop a minority-recruitment program for teachers and administrators. Adams also realized that all races should share the burden of busing, Dailey said, instead of just black students, who were being bused to predominantly white areas like Cape Coral and Lehigh Acres.

Adams started searching for solutions to end Blalock's lawsuit, a conclusion that could not happen until a federal judge ruled Lee County was not unfairly treating minority students. At the same time, the district's geographic boundary system — where students are assigned to the school closest to home — was failing because Lee County's quick housing boom forced constant boundary changes.

Controlled School Choice emerged as a solution to both issues. Once-segregated Fort Myers High now educates 613 minorities among its 2,043-student body, while the former all-black Dunbar High now has 523 white students among its 1,160 total.

Same Schools, Equal Education?

Federal Judge Steven Merryday declared on July 12, 1999, that Lee County was no longer operating two distinct systems — one for whites and one for blacks. His announcement essentially ended the Blalock case after the Lee County School District, NAACP and U.S. Department of Justice agreed on a settlement that required Lee schools to employ an equity director, continue the School Choice enrollment program and create a magnet high school in the Dunbar community of Fort Myers. The parties already had agreed that transportation and facility inequities had been addressed.

The superintendent and School Board are required by board policy to consult the Unitary School System Advisory Committee for potential changes in the student assignment plan, school openings or closings, land acquisitions, facility reviews and other issues relating to maintenance of a unitary school system.

No mainland school in Lee County has a minority student body of less than 20.87 percent, while none has a minority population higher than 70.23 percent. School Choice controls enrollment so all schools maintain minority populations within plus-or-minus 20 percent of the county's average for elementary, middle and high schools. Barrier island, magnet and special schools are exempt from the restrictions because of their unique services and geographic issues.

Knight says she now is more conscious of diversity and recently noted the range of participants' races in a teen fashion show coordinated by her daughter, a marketing teacher at North Fort Myers High.

"It was so nice to see those boys and girls all there together," Knight said. "That was the goal we were trying to reach in the 1970s, but these kids didn't think nothing about it."

Despite accomplishing the primary goal of diversifying schools based on race, Lee County has not managed to expunge statistical discrepancies throughout the district. Black students are nearly twice as likely to be labeled as learning disabled, and blacks and Hispanics are only half as likely to be placed into gifted programs.

Many school districts around the country report similar discrepancies, as well as statistics that show minority students are suspended or expelled at higher proportions than majority students. In Florida, the graduation rate of black students is 16.9 percentage points lower than the rate for whites.

"With the black kids, it's almost like you're going back 30 or 40 years," said Lee NAACP President Carletha Griffin. "The black kids are being put in slow-learning classes, while the white kids are being put in higher-level classes."

In Lee County, 13.8 percent of administrators and 10.6 percent of classroom teachers are minorities, while 40.3 percent of students are minorities. The school district sponsored a teacher recruitment fair in April that attracted 1,517 prospects, of which 15 percent were minorities. The fair not only provided a large number of minority applicants, but a highly qualified candidate pool that principals continue to use.

Denise Phillips-Luster, director of equity and recruitment, says the district has stepped up its efforts in recent years to reach out to all qualified applicants.

"We continue to visit historically black colleges in the eastern part of the United States, we advertise on some of the minority Web sites for recruiting and we advertise in newspapers in some of the southern states," she said.

Minority recruitment is also an issue for Estero High Principal Fred Bode, who noticed that only white students tried out for this year's cheerleading squad and ran for student government positions. He is seeking minority representation in sports, academic programs and clubs that resembles the school's generation minority population of 30.15 percent.

"What we're trying to do is get some of our minority students more involved in school functions, whether it's running for class president or the football team," Bode said. "That's the direction we need to head, but we're not there yet."

Although few would argue that Lee County has not made substantial progress since the Brown and Blalock rulings, race relations in Lee County has not yet reached a fairytale ending. Local NAACP members have been criticizing school officials for not firing or severely disciplining a Mariner High teacher who used the "n" word several times during a class discussion in January. The U.S. Office of Civil Rights currently has seven outstanding complaints against the Lee County School District, with two involving racial discrimination.

Adora Obi Nweze, president of Florida's state conference of the NAACP, recently traveled from Orlando to address the Lee County School Board. She planned to discuss the Mariner case and outline a plan for diversity training, but was cut off just three minutes into her 15-minute presentation. Nweze did not request additional time in writing, and board members opted to adhere to a policy that limits public comment to three minutes. They cited concerns of fairness because other speakers may have wanted additional time as well.

"They were so rude and ignorant; they just cut her off," Griffin said, adding that the local NAACP is investigating numerous complaints from parents worried about their children's treatment at school.

School officials acknowledge they must keep racial equity concerns at the forefront, even after federal oversight ceases. Still, they remain optimistic that recent incidents won't spoil four decades of achievement.

"We had a bump in the road, but I truly believe we'll all get stronger because of it and we will continue to do things to ensure that all people are treated the same," Superintendent Browder said. "My commitment, as it's always been, is to all children."

TIMELINE: DESEGREGATION IN LEE COUNTY

May 1954: U.S. Supreme Court rules that a "separate but equal" school system is unconstitutional and orders schools to desegregate.

May 1955: Supreme Court mandates that schools desegregate with "all deliberate speed." August 1964: NAACP files suit in Lee County on behalf of Rosalind Blalock, a black student who was denied access to Fort Myers High School.

February 1965: Court approves the School Board's plan to desegregate schools within five years.

August 1965: Lee County schools integrate with one black student at Alva Elementary and two at Edison Park Elementary.

May 1969: Court closes all-black schools in Lee County to force integration.

August 1983: School Board requests, and the court approves, a change in Dunbar Middle's boundaries to include non-minority enrollment and reduce overcrowding at area middle schools.

January 1991: Court approves plan to transition Edison Park Elementary and Franklin Park Elementary into magnet schools with a minority enrollment of 35 percent.

July 1991: Lee School Board members adopts a master plan for desegregation.

March 1993: Court approves expansion of magnet programs into Fort Myers Middle and Three Oaks Middle.

August 1996: A consent decree was signed by a judge acknowledging the district was desegregated in four of five areas: faculty and staff assignment, student transportation, extracurricular activities and facilities. Only student assignment remained as a sticking point.

August 1998: Lee County begins assigning some students through the controlled School Choice program, allowing students and parents to choose schools located anywhere within three geographic attendance zones.

December 1998: The School Board and NAACP agree in concept to settle the desegregation lawsuit by converting Dunbar Middle's facility into a technology magnet high school available to all students.

July 1999: Federal Judge Steven Merryday formally declares Lee County is operating a unitary, or desegregated, school system for all students.

July 2004: Lee County schools will exit federal court supervision.

Diversity is no longer just a black and white issue

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Fifty years ago, public schools were ordered to provide equal educational opportunities for black and white students.

It took some school districts, like Lee County, much longer than others to integrate black students into formerly all-white schools.

But in an era of immigration, diversity is no longer a black and white issue and the mandate from *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* is being extended to include other minority classifications. Hispanics now represent the largest minority group within the Lee County School District at 20.38 percent, compared to 14.60 percent for blacks, 2.86 percent for multiracial students, 1.33 percent for Asians and 0.37 percent for American Indians.

Many of Lee County's Hispanic immigrants learned Spanish as their first language, and some newcomers enroll in local schools with little or no English skills. The U.S. Supreme Court's order in *Brown* mandated an equal education for all students, but the quick rise of students with limited language abilities has prompted a greater need for school districts to offer language services, parental outreach programs and tutoring sessions.

Equal treatment doesn't necessarily mean equal dollars, either.

"We're going to put the resources we need with every child, but some children do need more assistance than others," Lee County Superintendent James Browder said. "Consequently, we'll assure that we balance that scale."

Lee County receives \$5,720 for each standard curriculum student, but the Florida Legislature funds children in the English for Speakers of Other Languages program, or ESOL, at a higher rate because of their unique needs. ESOL Specialist Ronda Amaya said those students are weighted at 1.298 for the 2003-04 budget year, giving the school district additional dollars to operate programs for the 6,867 registered ESOL students.

If that money isn't satisfactory to help those children, Browder says, the district won't hesitate to search for additional cash in other areas of the budget.

"Every dollar that comes for every student doesn't go into direct instruction; you have to take that pot of money and work with it so it's equitably spread to every youngster," Browder said. "You will take some dollars from one youngster's pot, if you will, to assure that a youngster who needs special help gets it so he or she has an opportunity to be successful."

The Supreme Court's intent in the *Brown* case, board member Steven Teuber says, was not just to integrate schools, but to provide equity and equalize the playing field.

"We need to provide every opportunity to succeed in this world," Teuber said.

Spring Creek Elementary in Bonita Springs, for instance, has accommodated its Spanish-speaking families by adding bilingual teachers, paraprofessionals and office workers. In 2002, Spring Creek became the first Lee County public school with more Hispanic students than white students, and nearby Bonita Springs Elementary and Tice Elementary in Fort Myers also report similar numbers this year. Spring Creek added a multicultural teacher to its instructional staff in 2000 and a Spanish teacher in 2002, whose lessons cater to both Spanish- and English-speaking students.

"With the English speakers, there has been a lot of progress," Spanish teacher Mercedes Meier said. "It's a matter of getting them motivated about the subject."

Pinewoods Elementary Principal Elizabeth Kasko said the next step in helping Spanish-speaking students is to develop community-based literacy programs that also involve their parents. Language barriers often deter parents from getting involved in their child's homework and school activities, and a student's academic achievement can be thwarted.

"With the families who learn English along with their children, the children usually do better because they can practice their skills at home," Kasko said.

Most Lee County schools have adopted the educational concept of inclusion, where students are assigned to mainstream classes instead of being separated from their peers. Although non English-speaking students have difficulties at first, they are able to learn language skills without missing valuable content instruction.

Mexico-native Elizabeth Mendoza, whose 6-year-old son is a kindergartner at Spring Creek Elementary, remembers being immersed into regular curriculum classes for math, science, social studies and other subjects when her family first moved to Wisconsin.

"When I came here as a child, I was put in the regular classroom for most of the day," Mendoza said. "But I was also pulled aside for English for a few hours during the day."

Although Hispanics represent the largest minority group, Lee County students hail from 101 countries and speak 61 native languages. Spanish, Creole and Portuguese are the most common, but there also has been a rise in German, Chinese, French and other languages.

Schools employ hundreds of staff members who are bilingual in English and Spanish, but facilities with at least 15 percent of students speaking a different language are required to supply information to parents in their native language. Several Lee schools have Creole-speaking staff members to accommodate Haitian families, and the school district's central office now employs Spanish and Creole translators to produce informational materials in those languages as well.

"The next thing we've got to stabilize, in my mind, is ensuring that all folks of different languages can be merged," Browder said. "Integration now isn't about the color or your skin; it's about getting everybody with the different languages to a point where we all have a common understanding of a communication vehicle."

School Board member Elinor Scricca has proposed that all elementary-age children be exposed to a foreign language soon after entering primary school. Scricca, who speaks four languages herself, has developed foreign language curriculums as a school administrator and says a second language will help students succeed in a global marketplace.

Forty years ago, neighborhoods in Lee County were either black or white. Segregation meant that schools also were either black or white.

Now, most sections of Lee County contain a mix of diverse races and cultures. The school district is divided into three geographic attendance zones, each of which has three subzones. White students still represent the majority

race in all nine subzones, but within two or three years, Hispanics could outnumber whites in the Bonita Springs/southern Estero subzone and the Tice/Bayshore subzone.

In the southernmost Lee subzone, white high schoolers outnumber Hispanic teenagers at almost a 2-to-1 margin. But Hispanic children represent the majority in kindergarten, first, second and third grades. As more young Hispanic families move into the area and older students graduate from the school system, the Bonita-area subzone will have a new racial majority group.

"Lee County is no longer just black and white," said Carletha Griffin, president of the NAACP's Lee County branch. "If you don't like it, you better move on."

History runs deep at Fort Myers' Dunbar High School

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Dunbar High School has endured segregation, economic depressions, location and name changes, wars and even a 30-year closure.

Soon, a fifth generation of Lee County students will start roaming the halls of Dunbar High, a school with a history deep enough to fill any textbook.

Originally called Paul Laurence Dunbar School when it opened in 1927, the facility at 1857 High St. was built with donations from local black businessmen and taxpayer dollars provided by the Lee County Board of Public Instruction. That site served a wide age range of students until 1962, when high school students moved to a new building at 3800 E. Edison Ave. Since then, adult and community education programs have been housed at the original school on High Street, now named Dunbar Community School.

The new Dunbar High, however, was closed just seven years after it opened. Lee County shut down its all-black schools, sending Dunbar High students to other schools in hopes of diversifying their enrollments. Middle school students then took control of that facility.

As part of its court-approved desegregation settlement, the Lee County School District agreed to reopen Dunbar High. In 2000, a spacious new Dunbar Middle opened at 4750 Winkler Ave. Extension, and Dunbar High moved back into its former digs on Edison Avenue by welcoming a new freshman class. It added one grade level per year, eventually building its enrollment to 1,160 students this year.

Although the facility was remodeled to become a math and science magnet high school, many Fort Myers residents felt slighted by the agreement. The new Dunbar Middle is five miles north of the Dunbar community, and the new Dunbar High was just an old building with a facelift.



"The school district is not building new schools where the disadvantaged student population is, so they are having to bus students out of there to other areas," said Frank Love, an NAACP member active in school affairs. "Why is the city letting them build schools everywhere but Dunbar?"

Lee County is trying to situate new schools in "gray areas" between communities, hoping to draw a diverse student body in areas where land is plentiful and less expensive. Charter Schools USA, though, recently purchased the vacant 3-year-old Topps Supermarket building on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to house a K-8 charter school that will open in August.

On Wednesday, Dunbar High will honor its first full graduating class in 35 years during commencement ceremonies at Harborside Event Center.

"Looking at the speeches of the valedictorian and salutatorian, it's obvious we made an impression on them about the school's history," said current Dunbar High Principal Carl Burnside.

Fighting for equality

By DAVE BREITENSTEIN, debreitenstein@naplesnews.com
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David Short has been a principal in Lee County for 25 years, leading three schools whose students primarily hail from low-income families.

His first principalship at Franklin Park Elementary in 1979 might have been the toughest challenge. It wasn't the students, though, that forced him to wear a path from the school to the district office. It was fighting his superiors to provide equal treatment to Franklin Park.

The school was situated in a predominantly black area of Fort Myers, while nearby Allen Park Elementary was located in a mostly white section. Both facilities opened in 1958, but Franklin Park was not as well maintained. Short, who was the school's first white principal, found himself struggling to counter two decades of neglect harbored from Lee County's segregated past.

"There were a million miles of difference in how those two schools were maintained," said Short, who now serves as principal of Bonita Elementary. "I was constantly fighting downtown to treat the two schools the same."

Short, 60, remembers when both schools were getting new freezers. Allen Park was provided a red brick barrier around the freezer, while Franklin Park received a "cheap metal fence" that Short says was a safety hazard.



When Allen Park received something new, like carpeting or televisions, Short said he demanded the same from district administration for his school. Franklin Park's campus also was littered with hypodermic needles, glass and other debris, and routine maintenance requests were often ignored.

"We had a stack of work orders two inches thick, but nothing was ever done," Short recalled.

Franklin Park has evolved from an all-black school in 1958 to multicultural magnet school that attracts a diverse student body from across the county. Its performance grade from the state has risen from a D in 1999 to a B in 2003, and third-, fourth- and fifth-graders could have set the school up for another rise with their recent strong performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.