This thesis will explore the traditions of African American educational activism in Charlotte, North Carolina between 1961 and 1974. During this time period, African Americans representing nearly every sector of the community relied on a flexible model of activism in their fight for schools which respected their educational traditions. Throughout this time period African Americans, with the help of some white Charlotteans, voiced their discontent with the status quo of public education which marginalized African American children and maintained the economic, political, and social control of a handful of white city fathers.

Moreover, African Americans rejected school desegregation plans created by the all-white Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board, which inflicted heavy blows on the black community and their educational and community institutions. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, white school officials regularly created integration and reform plans which closed historically black schools, fired black educators, and placed an undue burden on black students and their families. Schools represented a rare space of reprieve, empowerment, and opportunity in the bleak landscape of the Jim Crow South. Despite the enormous financial discrepancies between white and black schools, black communities came together to provide their students with an educational experience which met their intellectual and social needs. Desegregation plans that threatened these
treasured community resources were met with fierce opposition from African Americans not just in Charlotte, but across much of the nation.

In the early 1960s Rev. Reginald Hawkins and the Westside Parents Council organized a neighborhood school boycott in opposition to the discriminatory policies of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, activists including Rev. Elo Henderson and Rev. Robert Shirley attempted to use the newfound support of the federal government to pressure city and school officials to finally desegregate the schools. By the late 1960s, the rhetoric and ideology of Black Power stoked the fires of protest and social reform in Charlotte. Huge numbers of Charlotteans, white and black, young and old, rallied around Rev. George Leake and his quest to save the city’s historically black schools. When integration finally came to the schools in 1971, African American students took center stage as advocates for racial equity in educational reform. A quest for the dignity and rights of citizenship, not adherence to a strict protest ideology, motivated each of these individuals and groups. Black Charlotteans passionately waged a prolonged and often grueling battle for a model of school integration which honored the treasured traditions of their community. In this moment of enormous social turmoil, the public school system became the medium through which black and white Charlotteans jockeyed for greater cultural, political, and economic influence.
BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

“Education and power are terms of an indissoluble couplet. It is at times of social upheaval that this relationship between education and power becomes most visible.”

Looking back on his career in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, Ron Thompson, a white teacher and administrator, emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships and coalition building in public education. “That was the defining moment of my career because at that point it was all about us understanding one another, and understanding that for us to make it in a changing world we had to recognize differences, and we had to respect.” Thompson understood that an excellent teacher had a responsibility to impart more than just academic knowledge. “It was more than just teaching a subject. You had to understand human nature. You had to understand children. You had to understand community.”

Thompson’s recollections show how the development of relationships based on mutual respect and dignity between students, educators, and community members helped to guide the city of Charlotte through the chaos of school desegregation in the 1960s and early 1970s.

In a nation both defined and plagued by its racial and ethnic tensions, the movement to desegregate schools during the mid-twentieth century shook the United States to its core. For more than a century, African American community activists across the nation challenged the public schools to live up to the lofty ideals of tolerance and

2. Ron Thompson, telephone interview with author, November 16, 2007; [Hereafter cited as Thompson interview.]
freedom outlined in the nation’s founding documents. In Charlotte, North Carolina, the ongoing battle between African Americans and the white power structure reached a crescendo of protest and conflict in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Drawing on a rich and complex tradition of black educational activism dating back to Reconstruction, African Americans in Charlotte steadily built up a base of grassroots activism throughout the twentieth century. After the Brown decision, black Charlotteans faced a seemingly endless assault on black education with the closing of black schools, the termination of black educators, and the discriminatory treatment of black students in predominantly white schools. It became increasingly clear to African Americans that the city’s plans for school integration posed serious threats to the traditions of black education. In response, African Americans in Charlotte worked with a variety of groups and movements in their struggle to find a model of education which gave them access to the physical resources of white schools while maintaining black educational traditions.

At the regional level, school desegregation brought with it the potential for both enormous opportunity and loss for African Americans. Historically, education had represented a space of reprieve, empowerment, and opportunity for African Americans in the otherwise repressive socioeconomic order of Jim Crow. As David Cecelski has argued, “Like the best of families, they functioned as a daily shelter for black children to learn in-one with high expectations, strong role models, and constant reinforcement of
their dignity and self-respect.”

Black schools provided local communities important central meeting places, represented a crucial site of communal cooperation and ownership, and offered tangible economic opportunities for African Americans both as sources of employment for educators and as a sources of future economic mobility for students. However, by any measure, black schools had far fewer financial and physical resources than their white counterparts. As noted by Davison Douglas in his study of school desegregation in Charlotte, “By 1915, African American schools received only 13 percent of total monies; at that time, the state spent an average $7.40 for each white child and $2.30 for each black child.”

In theory at least, integration gave African American students greater access to such resources in the way of newer facilities, newer textbooks, and learning materials. Perhaps most importantly, school desegregation held enormous social value as an affirmation of the equal worth of all citizens and the importance of interracial cooperation and understanding in a multi-cultural world. Looking back on her experiences at Garringer High School, Madelyn Wilson, an African American student in the first integrated class in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in 1971, attested to the social value of racial diversity. “We’re part of the world. We need to experience other people. We need to know.”

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6 Madelyn Wilson, interview with author, Charlotte, NC, April 9, 2007. [Hereafter cited as Wilson interview.]
The bulk of scholarly studies of school desegregation focus either on the legislative challenges to segregation or the ferocity of white opposition to integration. Many scholars have completed serious accounts of the contributions of national civil rights organizations like the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), well-known figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and of course the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*.\(^7\) Considerable attention has also been paid to white opposition to school integration, at both the grassroots and national level.\(^8\) Too often, moments of spectacular public success, such as Supreme Court and federal legislation, dominate portrayals of the civil rights movement. The historiography of this era frequently relegates social movements that focused on improving the daily lives of average African Americans, especially those that appear to have a mixed record of “success,” to the sidelines of our national memory.

Fewer works still have looked seriously at the role black community activists played in affecting change in their local school systems, or analyzed the methodology or goals of their activism. Among the many studies of the desegregation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, few have given local black activists center stage in the


narrative. These stories of grassroots educational activists--acknowledging both their successes and failures--expand our understanding of what was really at stake in these battles over desegregation and educational reform. For the thousands of black Charlotteans who did the arduous work of building up community networks, passing out pamphlets, recruiting supporters door-to-door, and organizing meetings, activism responded to the daily needs of their fellow citizens. People deserved and demanded access to good schools for their children. Organizers embraced different methods from day-to-day as circumstances changed. In the early 1960s, Rev. Reginald Hawkins and the Westside Parents Council organized a neighborhood school boycott in opposition to the discriminatory policies of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, activists including Rev. Elo Henderson and Rev. Robert Shirley attempted to use the newfound support of the federal government to pressure city and school officials to finally desegregate the schools. By the late 1960s, the rhetoric and ideology of Black Power stoked the fires of protest and social reform in Charlotte. Huge numbers of Charlotteans, white and black, young and old, rallied around Rev. George Leake and his quest to save the city’s historically black schools. When integration finally came to the schools in 1971, African American students took center stage as advocates for racial equity in educational reform. A quest for the dignity and rights of citizenship, not adherence to a strict protest ideology, motivated each of these

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9 See Douglas, Reading, Writing &Race; Bernard Schwartz, Swann’s Way: The School Busing Case and the Supreme Court (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Frye Gaillard, A Dream Long Deferred (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Pres, 1988). While each of these works addresses black educational activism to some extent, none make the efforts of African American grassroots activists the central focus of their study.
individuals and groups. Black Charlotteans passionately waged a prolonged and often grueling battle for a model of school integration which honored the treasured traditions of their community. In this moment of enormous social turmoil, the public school system became the medium through which black and white Charlotteans jockeyed for greater cultural, political, and economic influence.

A discussion of the Westside Parents Council’s (WPC) boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High School in August and September, 1961, acts as a useful lens through which to understand the roots of grassroots educational activism in Charlotte. For nine days, the WPC, led largely by Rev. Dr. Reginald Hawkins, voiced its opposition to integration plans which devalued black educational traditions and stifled black voices in the decision making process. Throughout the 1950s, the city school board established a pattern of pulling white students out of schools in newly integrated neighborhoods, and subsequently closing these schools once they became predominantly black. In 1961, the school board announced its plans to reassign the white students and staff of Harding High School to a new all-white facility, and turn Harding into the all-black Irwin Avenue Junior High School. This proposal triggered heavy protests from black Charlotteans. Throughout their protest, the WPC and Dr. Hawkins consistently demanded greater respect from school officials in the form of a substantive voice and role in the desegregation process and integration plans which protected black schools and educators. The issue of respect would remain central to the African American community’s critique of the school board’s handling of the desegregation process throughout the 1960s and 1970s.
In his leadership of the boycott, Hawkins faced substantive challenges on two fronts: white city fathers with a vested interest in the status quo, and African American real-estate developer Fred Alexander. Alexander was the brother of Kelly Alexander, State NAACP President. Hawkins considered Fred Alexander something of a sell-out in the fight for racial equality, and Alexander, for his part, saw Hawkins as a militant racial agitator. Hawkins faced stiff resistance from white school officials and newly elected Mayor Stanford Brookshire, both of whom sought to protect the city from the embarrassment of a messy racial conflict in the depths of the Cold War. In the third week of the boycott, Mayor Brookshire established the Committee on Community Relations (CCR), ostensibly to address the grievances of black activists. Always the savvy politician, Brookshire appointed Fred Alexander to the committee, but excluded Hawkins. White politicians had long employed this method of assigning black activists to ineffectual interracial committees with no enforcement power as a way to consolidate white control and reduce independent black activism. Ultimately, the pressures from Alexander and Mayor Brookshire proved too much for Hawkins and the WPC to withstand, and the committee pressured the WPC into ending the boycott without any concessions from the school board. Despite the apparent failure of the boycott, early black activists involved in the 1961 protest learned valuable lessons about the nature of organizing and methods. In subsequent movements they would work harder to gather greater citywide support and build alliances across racial lines. After the boycott, black activists remained wary of entering into any agreements with the school board or city officials.
From 1964 to 1969, a period of enormous social upheaval and activity occurred at the legislative, judicial, and grassroots level. The passage of the Civil Rights Act (CRA) in 1964 exerted real pressure on local school boards to desegregate for the first time. However, the integration plans created by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board struggled to meet even the most basic guidelines outlined by the new federal legislation. These plans took a heavy toll on black educational traditions, including the closure of black schools and the firing black educators. Not surprisingly, the board’s plans evoked passionate opposition from every segment of the black community, and incited waves of marches, economic boycotts, and protest rallies.

The movements of the mid-to late 1960s brought significant changes to the black protest movement itself. Most notably, in the late 1960s greater numbers of young activists, some of them students, played major roles in crafting the direction of the movement. While students’ needs had also played a significant part in the boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High in 1961, students themselves took center stage as both the inspiration and architects of the movement in the protests at the end of the decade. Additionally, these years witnessed the beginnings of a broader acceptance of the need for racially equitable desegregation plans by many white Charlotteans. Whites representing nearly every segment of the city, from the working-class to the elite strata of Charlotte’s society, joined their black neighbors’ calls for racial justice in the schools. Although the overwhelming majority of protestors remained African American, the inclusion of greater numbers of white activists signaled a new era in the Queen City’s
racial politics based upon interracial and interclass alliances. Ultimately, a buy-in from the majority of citizens would be critical to the success of desegregation in Charlotte.

The climax and culmination of this story of racial conflict and educational reform in Charlotte came when system-wide school desegregation finally began in the fall of 1971. Students and teachers faced a truly chaotic scene in the schools. Even after the landmark ruling in Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education ordered the school board to desegregate every school in the system, the board continued to contest the ruling and in the process ignored the needs of students and educators. As these battles between the plaintiffs in Swann, school officials, the court, and community interest groups waged on, racial tensions between white and black students rose steadily. African American students continually voiced serious discontent with their treatment in the schools. However, school administrators moved slowly, if at all, to address their concerns. African American students then organized themselves within the schools and built alliances with other community activists to express their frustration with integration plans which put the heaviest burden of change on black students. Eventually, years of verbal confrontations between black community activists and school officials manifested themselves in all-out physical melees in the schools. Fighting amongst students and temporary school closures became commonplace in the early 1970s.

Ultimately the voices of African American students grew too loud to ignore, and beginning in 1973, the broader community began to take the steps necessary to create and implement desegregation plans which met the needs of all students. Through the efforts of a number of different community groups, the school board finally agreed to a new
desegregation plan which distributed the burden of change more equitably. Throughout this period, African American students worked tirelessly to outline their grievances and organized a sophisticated, multi-faceted protest movement to achieve their goals. Their efforts, like those of many others, illustrate the incredible commitment African Americans had to education, and the sacrifices they would make in their pursuit of a quality education.

While the mobilization of black Charlotteans is undeniably inspiring, this level of passion and dedication is not unusual in the narrative of African American education history. Prior to Emancipation, slaves understood the incredible value of education, and the inextricable links between education and freedom. They pursued literacy in the face of harsh punishments from slave owners. White elites recognized that education for slaves represented a grave threat to their political, economic, and social control. Their resistance to black education only served to fuel freedpeople’s desire for education. Both groups quickly realized the centrality of education in the maintenance of the social structure.10 As James Anderson argues in his remarkable study of black education, “It was believed that Virginia’s peace, prosperity, and ‘civilization’ depended as much, if not more, on the containment and repression of literate culture among its enslaved population as it did on the diffusion of literate culture among its free population.”11 High stakes defined the battle for economic power and social mobility in the antebellum South. This

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dynamic of education as the fulcrum of social power continued into the struggles over school desegregation more than 100 years later.

Southern white elites harnessed the power of the law to prevent slaves from gaining access to education, and by the mid-19th century, it was illegal in most southern states to educate slaves. African American slaves and African Americans living in the mid-twentieth century shared an intrinsic faith in education as a force of liberation and empowerment. This linkage between education and activism distinguished black education from its white counterparts, and became one of the central tenets of black education throughout the black freedom movements of the twentieth century.

Indeed, African Americans’ desire for a redistribution of political capital played a central role in the conflicts over education from Reconstruction through the black freedom movements of the 1970s, and helps explain why schools were frequent battlegrounds of interracial conflict. Heather Williams’s arguments about the connection between learning and political power in the Reconstruction era could just as easily be applied to a discussion of black educational activism in Charlotte in the 1960s.

“Acquiring literacy in conjunction with freedom had the potential to open access to democratic political activity, and that in turn held a promise of enabling African Americans to participate in shaping the civil society in which they had hitherto been considered chattel-insurgent chattel, but chattel just the same.”12 Similarly, political literacy was a necessity for African Americans 100 years later. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board’s plans systematically ignored the interests and voices of the

black community. Plans reflected the enormous power held in the alliance between wealthy white school officials, businessmen, and local politicians, and evidenced their assumption that they could force these plans upon the black community because of African Americans lack of political power.

Early structures of black education also reflected a strong relationship between community identity and the value of learning. Because of the perceived value of education and the enormous obstacles most African Americans faced in actually getting a good education, communities encouraged individuals to spread the physical and social benefits of that education to the race as a whole. Educated African Americans carried the responsibility to give back to the race through formal “uplift” work, and to elevate the community by acting as models of responsible, mature, self-disciplined, and gracious leaders.\textsuperscript{13}

African American communities placed special emphasis on the education and professional advancement of young middle- and upper-class women. Stephanie Shaw argues in her study of black professional women during segregation that while the dual structures of racial and gender discrimination marginalized African American women in profound ways, in some case their gender and race also afforded them unique educational avenues. Parents of daughters devoted themselves to providing a “better life” for their children and to give their daughters the best possible education because they knew that without an education their daughters would be subjected to manual and domestic labor. “The economic and sexual exploitation of black women in these occupations was well

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
known to them, so to ensure that that would not be the lot of their daughters, those mothers and fathers who could do so provided their daughters with as much education as possible-sometimes at great sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{14} Through both the formal educational process and less traditional avenues of learning, parents, educators, and community members sought to instill values of morality, self-determination, generosity, kindness, and self-discipline. Once these women began their professional careers, the community expected them to give back to the race. Communities invested heavily in education because of their great faith in the power of learning to liberate and empower, and therefore educational institutions became some of the black community’s most significant community resources.

While the black community in Charlotte during the 1960s and 1970s mobilized around the issues of quality education and representation in the educational reform process at all levels, some of the most spectacular conflicts centered on black high schools. Throughout African American history, the high school occupied a particularly central and precious place in the community. As Frederick Rodgers argues in his study of the role of the black high schools in North Carolina, “In a real sense, the black high school was the black community in many areas in North Carolina. This being so, the extent of progress a given black community could make was dependent on the course taken and the programs implemented by the black high school.”\textsuperscript{15} Because for many African Americans, for much of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, a high school degree would be the


\textsuperscript{15} Rodgers, \textit{The Black High School and Its Community}, 74.
highest possible level of education possible, a high school diploma represented the key to future economic and social success. The lack of financial resources greatly restricted the ability of teachers to fulfill the enormous needs of their students. “In North Carolina in 1945-1946 the value of school property per pupil enrolled was $217 for white students and $70 for black children. In 1951, even though blacks comprised about 30 percent of North Carolina’s population, they possessed only about 14.2 percent of its school facilities.”16 Despite these structures of racial discrimination, schools and churches were some of the few spaces in which African Americans could express themselves intellectually, act as leaders, and gain the skills to compete globally.

Figure 1. Billingsville School, Charlotte, 1951.17

As a number of scholars have begun to argue in recent years, financial resources alone did not define the quality of the black educational experience in segregated

17 Billingsville School, Charlotte, 1951, in Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 57.
The virtual dominance of integration ideology within the civil rights movement culminating in the *Brown* decision has shaped the national debate about the definition of quality education, and the educational needs of African American students. A tragic unintended consequence of *Brown* has been the marking of black schools as inherently inferior because of their minority status. These images of substandard black schools ignore the emotional, social, and political value of African American schools. The memories of Madelyn Wilson, a senior at West Charlotte High School at the time integration began in Charlotte, illustrate that families had strong bonds with “their” high school that went far beyond the diploma. Wilson recalled, “My family came out of Second Ward High School. My family was the Second Ward crowd.” She continued, “Actually when I was sent to West Charlotte, my uncle said to me they were willing to pay for me to ride a bus across town for me to go back to Second Ward, because we didn’t come out of West Charlotte.” The voices of black Charlotteans like Wilson provide a fuller picture of what black schools meant to parents, students, teachers, and the community, and complicate the narrative of black educational activism during the 1960s and 1970s. The recollections of former Charlotte-Mecklenburg teacher, Ruth Morris, also illustrate the difficulties African Americans faced with school desegregation and the conflicting emotions surrounding the loss of black schools. “Sometimes I think we have lost out on a lot…our children don’t get the recognition that they got when there were all

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19 Wilson interview.
the black schools.” After nearly 100 years of gathering the resources, building up schools from scratch, and protecting them from outside influences, African American communities faced the prospect of losing these school communities and surrendering their children to white-controlled schools that had fought so vehemently to exclude them.

In their quest to provide for both the educational and moral needs of their children, segregated schools relied heavily on strong bonds and communication between parents, students, and teachers. As Vanessa Siddle Walker argues, these schools, through the extraordinary sacrifices of the entire community, provided support and empowerment to their students in ways that defied traditional measurements. “The segregated school is most often compared with a ‘family’ where teachers and principal, with parentlike authority, exercised almost complete autonomy in shaping student learning. Parents played an active role also: they are remembered for the monetary and nonmonetary contributions they made.” In the face of extreme economic and political oppression during segregation, these schools served purposes far beyond the classroom, often acting as community centers, venues for social events and fraternal organizations. African Americans in Charlotte, like their activist forebears across the South, understood the invaluable role that high schools played in their communities, and because of this reacted strongly to the school board’s plans to tear them down.

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21 Walker, Their Highest Potential, 4.

22 Cecelski, Along Freedom Road, 9.
Very few African American communities, however, had ready access to high schools. Few black high schools existed in the South well into the 1940s, and those that did were inevitably located in large cities. In 1915, twenty-three southern cities with populations of more than twenty thousand did not have black high schools, including Atlanta, Charlotte (Second Ward High School was built in 1923), New Orleans, Tampa, and Montgomery. Indeed, between 1873 and 1907, no black high schools existed in North Carolina, and the state board of education did not accredit the first black high school until 1919. Subsequent growth in the number of schools, and the numbers of enrolled students attested to the great demand for black high schools. “Ten years later, 1933-1934, there were 106 public and ten private accredited black high schools serving almost 98 percent of blacks enrolled in high school.” James Anderson argues that by the time the Rosenwald Fund became involved in funding black secondary schools in the South in 1926, high schools had already been established in every large city. The Rosenwald Fund sought to shape the direction of future development of black high schools. “After recognizing that the southern black high school movement was going forward without any stimulus from northern philanthropic foundations, the agents concluded: ‘There is no need to stimulate it. The main thing is to control it and direct it into the right channels.’” As Anderson noted, “The Rosenwald Fund did not intend, however, to develop black industrial high schools that would produce technically trained young men and women for skilled jobs or for occupational mobility.” Although the

24 Rodgers, *The Black High School and Its Community*, 16.
Rosenwald Fund should certainly be praised for its significant financial support of black schools in the South, it must be noted that it also sought to use schools to maintain the socioeconomic status quo.25

Outside of urban areas, black public high schools remained few and far between for much of the early 20th century. For the majority of black southerners, this meant that their children had to move away from home to attend school. The willingness of many parents to make the emotional and financial sacrifices necessary to send their children away to high school reflected their strong faith in education as they key to future success.26 The lack of black high schools illustrated the desire of white elites to control and limit educational opportunities for African Americans, because of the potentially subversive nature of education. “The virtual absence of black public high schools reflected the opposition of the vast majority of white southerners, particularly in the rural communities and small towns, to black secondary education.”27 Once again, access to education and control over educational content, emerged as the central battleground between African Americans and whites in the broader struggle for social, political, and economic power.

The value of high schools in black communities and their relative scarcity helps to explain the numerous instances of fierce opposition to the closing of black high schools during 1960s and 1970s. In fact, the roots of black educational activism surrounding the closing of black schools date back to the late 1800s. In 1880, the Richmond County

25 Anderson, Education of Blacks in the South, 206 and 208.
26 Shaw, What a Woman Ought to Be and Do, 31.
27 Anderson, Education of Blacks in the South, 186 and 194.
School Board finally approved the building of a black high school in Augusta, Georgia, after years of requests from the African American community. Ware High, like many black high schools throughout the South, quickly became a source of great pride to the black community and provided its students with a greater chances for future economic success. So, when the school board voted to close Ware High School in 1897, the black community erupted in vehement protests. The plaintiff’s for the attorneys argued that the precedent set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* required the state to provide equal educational facilities. However, in his opinion, Justice John Marshall virtually ignored *Plessy*, and argued that the plaintiffs had failed to show that race was the only factor leading to the school board’s decision to close Ware. Despite a plethora of evidence which showed that the school board provided white schools with substantially better facilities and more funding, the court ruled in favor the defendants and upheld the school board’s decision to close Ware High School.²⁸ This ruling had devastating consequences for African Americans in Richmond County, as the county did not build another black high school until 1945. *Cumming v. School Board of Richmond County, Georgia* revealed not only the intensity of white opposition to black education but also the strong bonds between African American communities and their schools, and the fervor with which they would defend these beloved resources.²⁹ As black Charlotteans’ passionate battles on behalf of Second Ward High School illustrate, high schools fulfilled more than just students’

²⁸ Ibid, 192.  
²⁹ Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education 75 U.S. 528 (1899).
academic needs; they represented places of communal strength and cooperation, achievement and racial pride, and empowerment as citizens.

While many local residents played crucial roles in creating these school communities, black teachers took on the most direct responsibility for educating their students. As some of the most highly educated people in the African American community under segregation, educators garnered considerable respect. In the early years after Emancipation, black teachers led the fight to build up schools and educate the next generation of African Americans so that they could exercise their newfound rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Although traditional historical accounts give northern philanthropists a great deal of credit for spurring the movement for black education in the post-Civil War South, it was black educators who took on the central role in creating and supporting educational institutions which met the needs of their community. In many cases white northerners manipulated school curriculums to control black economic opportunities and thus maintain the social order. Many black educators, in contrast, saw education as an opportunity to challenge white supremacy. Black educators and teachers specifically, could challenge white control over the content of black education. Therefore, teacher training took on central importance in the effort to build libratory models of education. Whites attempted to weaken African American teachers’ position in their communities by questioning their competency and qualifications. This devaluing of black teachers inevitably came paired with strong messages about the superiority of white teachers. The attacks against black teachers represented yet another attempt by powerful whites to
wrest control of black education from African American communities, and place it in the hands of white educators, philanthropies, and governments that had the interests of white planters in mind. 30

African American teachers maintained their prominent role in the Jim Crow South, but the prospect of school desegregation exposed serious tensions within African American communities about the definition of quality education. Much of the plaintiff’s argument in Brown centered on the fundamentally unequal nature of black schools and the damage which segregated schools inflicted on black students emotionally and academically. Although black schools certainly were unequal and inferior in terms of physical resources, much of the public debate surrounding integration did not explore the nuances of the distinction between the physical failures of the schools and their great social value. In the eyes of much of the public, the Brown ruling publicly condemned black schools, and by proxy black educators and students. Black educators understood clearly not only the judgment about their work but also the very real threat school desegregation represented to their jobs. Not surprisingly, many black educators struggled to come to terms with the impending changes and wavered over whether they should support integration. After all, nothing in the history of black education or the experiences of black educators dating back to slavery could have led them to believe that whites would protect their interests or defend their right to exercise control over their educational experience in the desegregation process. 31

30 Anderson, Education of Blacks in the South, 79.
31 See Anderson, Education of Blacks in the South.
Their fears were not unfounded. “The first eleven years of desegregation had devastating effects on black teachers in the seventeen southern and Border States. In that period alone, more than 30,000 black teachers lost their jobs.”—32 After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, school boards across the South responded to the increasing pressures for integration by closing black schools and quickly firing black teachers whose services were no longer “necessary.” White school officials openly admitted that integration would likely result in the firing of black teachers. “Shortly after the Brown decision, all but three of the North Carolina school superintendents predicted that they would find it ‘impractical’ to use African American teachers in desegregated schools.”—33 White school administrators invoked the rhetoric of black educational inferiority and the myths of black educators’ professional incompetence to rationalize their actions against black teachers.

In 1965, the National Education Association predicted that “the jobs of as many as 5,500 Negro teachers in the eleven southern states may be endangered over the next several years.” That same year, the NEA voted to raise $1 million to support teachers fired during the school desegregation process.—34 A 1967 survey commissioned by the Southern Education Report looked at the number of black principals heading integrated schools. The authors found that the number of black principals in the South had declined for the past five years, and that black principals had few future opportunities in much of the region. The study argued that there was an urgent need to open up more opportunities

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to black principals, or else they would become more resistant to integration and the school systems would lose the talent and leadership of black principals.

Black principals also suffered in the consolidation of black and white schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System. From 1953 to 1964, the number of black principals decreased by 282, while the number of white principals increased by 96. Between 1964 and 1968, the number of black principals decreased by 100, and white principals increased by 60. “During the entire fifteen-year period under analysis, the number of principals in the public schools of North Carolina decreased by 230, or 9.8 percent. The number of Negro principals decreased 382, or 42.8 percent. The number of white principals increased 156, or 10.9 percent.” Clearly, desegregation took a heavy toll on black principals.

The number of black educators who lost their jobs as a result of school integration likely extends beyond the number of teachers explicitly fired because of their race. A number of teachers may have decided to leave the profession because of the emotional stress inherent in having to teach in predominantly white schools in the midst of the chaos of school integration. Whereas black teachers commanded a great deal of respect in black schools and communities during segregation, they exercised considerably less power in predominantly white schools. Ruth Morris expressed the difficulties many black teachers experienced in adapting to white schools. “I first taught at a two teacher school with a pot bellied stove and an outdoor toilet and the pump. Sometimes I probably rather be back there than now with all the modern equipment because you got
the respect of the students and from the parents. You had control."35 Additionally, school officials frequently demoted black principals to teaching assignments, assistant principals, or even clerical positions. As James Haney notes, “In addition to the report of wholesale dismissals, failures to renew contracts, requiring certain scores on the National Teacher’s Examination that were interpreted differently for black teachers, the task force found other “reasons” to justify the displacement of black teachers.” In some cases, school districts attempted to use federal civil rights legislation as a tool to push out black teachers. Officials reclassified “a general teaching position under a specific federally funded category such as Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and failing to comply with Federal and civil rights requirements.”36 These conflicts over the role of black educators in integrated schools raised serious questions about the function of public schools in preparing students to be citizens in the larger society. Could students go on to be successful members in society based, in principle if not in practice, on democratic values and cultural tolerance, if they were taught in segregated settings? Moreover, did schools have a constitutional duty to create ethnically and racially diverse school communities? Black educators, perhaps more than any other group, faced the difficult task of evaluating the long term needs of black students, and weighing their obligations to provide students with the best possible educational experience against their own personal economic and professional needs. Although many black teachers did choose to oppose desegregation because of fears about their jobs, those teachers who did

35 Morris and Wilson interview.
support integration knowingly put students’ interests above their own. Black educators’ role in the desegregation process must be viewed within this tradition of sacrifice.

Ultimately, in Charlotte, black educators chose to join the fight against segregated schools. Just months after Darius and Vera Swann filed suit against the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board on behalf of a group of black parents and children in 1965, the North Carolina’s Teachers Association, the state’s black teachers professional organization, joined the plaintiffs. The teachers alleged that the school board’s practice of assigning educators on the basis of race violated the constitutional rights established by *Brown*. The teachers joined the fight against the school board with great intensity. “The North Carolina’s Teachers Association filed forty-six lawsuits in 1964 and 1965 alone on behalf of African American teachers who were dismissed in the wake of the school closures and desegregation.”37 Many of these suits were filed with the assistance of Julius Chambers, who represented the plaintiffs in the landmark school desegregation case, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. The sheer numbers of law suits also suggests that teachers may have felt less vulnerable to economic and personal retributions as a group. While individual teachers who stood up in opposition to discriminatory policies could reasonably expect reprisals from school officials, their numbers offered a certain degree of safety.

In the summer of 1969, the NCTA reported a marked increase in complaints of racial discrimination from black educators. The *Charlotte Observer* reported, “E.B. Palmer, NCTA executive secretary, said that 15 recent complaints were under

investigation, including four received this past week. The NCTA already has 22 complaints being investigated and 46 more in court.”

In light of the hesitancy of many black educators to support school segregation because of fears of losing their jobs, the NCTA’s entry into the Swann case merits further analysis. Black teachers in Charlotte certainly recognized that school desegregation, especially in light of the heavier pressures placed on the school board with the Civil Rights Act, meant closures of black schools and likely firings of black teachers. The closures of several historically black high schools including Central High, First Ward Elementary, and Zeb Vance Elementary School in the late 1950s and early 1960s clearly illustrated the school board’s willingness to sacrifice black schools. Their decision was made with a keen awareness of the potential ramifications. Historically, black teachers had taught in spite of considerable reprisals from whites. As noted by Davison Douglas, “In 1938 white teachers’ salaries exceed black salaries by about 25 to 30 percent.” Douglas goes on to cite the findings of a 1934 study conducted by the biracial Commission for the Study of Problems in Negro Education which “revealed significant disparities between the salaries of black and white teachers.” Beginning in the 1930s, teachers had begun fighting to equalize salaries. However by the 1950s, significant progress had been made in the equalization campaign, and desegregation, with its potential loss of autonomy, represented even greater uncertainties for black educators. In spite of this, many African Americans devoted their professional, and indeed in many cases personal, lives to the education of a future generation.

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39 Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 20.
Still, black teachers could have seen their participation in *Swann* as a way to ensure that the desegregation process would be more equitable, and thus allow them to secure a more stable position for themselves in the public schools. Although they had no guarantee of the success of the case, their entry into it and relationship with the plaintiff’s attorney gave them an avenue to seek legal redress against the school board.

While the exact motivations of the black educators represented by the NCTA can not be clearly determined, their actions must be understood within the historic context of the role of black educators in the community dating back to slavery. Moreover, recognition of the social, economic, and political values of black schools shape our understanding of the tensions and anxieties within black communities like Charlotte at the prospect of desegregation. Teachers, students, and parents gambled with an acute awareness of the stakes.
“I want to see the kids in school as much as the school board does. But I think sending them to school under second class citizenship, under the humiliation of segregation, is a worse handicap than any education they might miss by not attending.”

On September 4, 1957, crowds of jeering white students gathered at Harding High School to give one fifteen-year-old African American student a welcome reception she would not soon forget. As Dorothy Counts, dressed in a red and yellow gingham checked dress with a long white bow on the front collar, made her way towards the front doors the mob of students closed in around her. The crowd showed little mercy. Students held up signs that read “Nigger Get Out,” while others spit and threw sticks at Counts as she passed, as they chanted “Nigger Go Back to Africa.” A group of students encircled the car Counts had arrived in and tried to flip it over. The harassment did not abate inside the school walls. Looking back on her experiences at Harding fifty years later, she recalled one particularly terrifying moment when a group of white boys surrounded her in the lunchroom and spit in her food. Another day, a group of students attacked her brother’s car when he came to pick her up from school, smashing in the back window. Slowly but surely the threat of physical violence escalated. Just eight days after the first day of school, Counts’s family withdrew her from Harding rather than expose

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her to the daily humiliation. Counts went to live with her aunt in Philadelphia where she attended an integrated school.41

Counts’s family was solidly middle class with strong ties to many of the city’s civil rights leaders and organizations. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the state branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), headed by Kelly Alexander, had begun recruiting black families to apply for transfers for their children to predominantly white schools. Alexander approached Herman Counts, a Presbyterian minister and professor of theology at the historically black Johnson C. Smith University, about requesting a transfer for his daughter to Harding High. Counts agreed, and in the fall of 1957, Dorothy Counts was one of only four African American students to attend Charlotte’s white schools.42

42 Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 72.
Figure 2. Dorothy Counts’s first day at Harding High, Charlotte, 1957.43

43 Dorothy Counts arrives for her first day of classes at Harding High School, September 4, 1957, in Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 73.
Since that day more than fifty years ago, many journalists and scholars have reprinted those photographs of Dorothy Counts and nearly every article about school desegregation in Charlotte features the integration of Harding High School in 1957. While these images represent one important piece of the narrative of school integration in Charlotte, the roots of black educational activism extend much deeper. Counts certainly bore the burden of waging the first public battle against segregation but her actions grew out of a strong base of community activism and grassroots leadership in Charlotte. In fact, closer examination of these very photographs offers clues of the future direction and character of the civil rights movement in Charlotte.

Protesting Students await Dorothy Counts at Harding High School, September 4, 1957, in Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 74.
Rev. Dr. Reginald A. Hawkins escorted Dorothy through the crowds to the steps of Harding High. During the 1950s and 1960s, this ordained minister, dentist, and civil rights leader played a pivotal role in black Charlotteans’ battles against segregated schools and a white elite’s domination of city politics. In 1961, Dr. Hawkins, and a group of more than 100 black parents from West Charlotte’s predominately African American neighborhoods formed the Westside Parents Council (WPC) and led a nine-day long school boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High School. The WPC drew upon pre-existing community and kinship networks in West Charlotte, historically a hotbed of educational activism. As Christina Greene noted in her study of grassroots African American organizing in Durham, North Carolina, such movements relied heavily on networks that “included both formal and informal associational life, such as neighborhood and kin ties and local and national black organizations.” Women played central roles in grassroots organizations like the WPC, facilitating conversations between protestors about their grievances and building up crucial support systems. Anthropologist James Scott has argued that these informal conversations between neighbors, friends, and relatives functioned as crucial spaces of subversion against the white power structure. Parents and community members in West Charlotte came together to find solutions to their shared concerns with the quality of education provided to black students. They stood up in opposition to school desegregation plans that placed the heaviest burdens of

integration on the black community, while simultaneously excluding them from the planning process.

Dr. Hawkins, the WPC’s leader, faced considerable challenges on two fronts in this battle for racial reform in the early 1960s. Throughout the boycott of Irwin Avenue, Hawkins fought against white school officials who consistently looked for ways to make integration a one-way street. More than five years after *Brown*, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board, Board of Education, and white political elites worked arduously to avoid substantive school integration. Their efforts to circumvent *Brown* came at a heavy price for black educational traditions. School officials frequently closed black schools, fired black teachers, and reassigned black students to schools far away from their homes. The boycott also exposed serious rifts within the black community in Charlotte over protest methodology. Hawkins clashed publicly and often with Fred Alexander, an African American real estate developer, who attacked Hawkins for his use of direct action protest tactics. Alexander argued that private negotiations and political alliances with white city fathers offered the greatest opportunity for change. The two men differed sharply on the issues of tactics and leadership philosophy throughout the boycott. Ultimately however, city politicians used backdoor negotiations to pressure the WPC to call off its boycott before it had achieved its main objective of integrating Irwin Avenue Junior High School. The recently elected Mayor Stanford Brookshire outmaneuvered WPC activists with the creation of an interracial committee purportedly committed to resolving racial conflicts. The committee offered the hope of fairness and greater political influence for African Americans, but in reality acted only to limit the
power of African Americans’ social critiques by restricting activists to ineffectual committees without enforcement power. Despite this, the WPC’s efforts merit serious consideration because of the insight they provide into the strengths and weaknesses of neighborhood organizing, and the development of protest methodology in the civil rights movement.

Photographs taken that day act as a useful starting point for analyzing the protest models of the 1950s and early 1960s, and the class and gender dynamics of grassroots organizing in Charlotte. Counts’s demeanor and dress exemplified what many scholars refer to as the “politics of respectability” that dominated the black freedom movements of this period. As noted by Davison Douglas, “A New York Times reporter described Counts as ‘a comely lady of unmistakable gentleness and breeding,’ who confronted the jeering crowd ‘with a quiet dignity that made theories of Negro inferiority grotesque.’”

Much in the same way that black leaders in Montgomery embraced Rosa Parks as the symbol of the bus boycott in 1955 in part because of her modest appearance and generally wholesome manner, NAACP leaders in Charlotte selected Dorothy Counts precisely because she fit this image of “respectability.”

In the wake of Brown and the ensuing white backlash against school integration, black activists tread lightly in a landscape of educational activism scattered with sexual and racial landmines. Whites had long invoked the specter of miscegenation and the image of the sexually deprived black man to rally white opposition to school integration. Local black leaders’ selection of Dorothy Counts to integrate Harding High must also be understood within the context of these stereotypes of black masculinity. Savvy activists
understood that white opponents would frame a black male student’s attempts to integrate
a white school as a threat to the sanctity of white womanhood. The sexual politics of the
time made Dorothy Counts significantly less threatening in the eyes of most white
Charlotteans.

However, by promoting an image of black womanhood detached from sexuality
and the long history of sexual violence against black women, the “politics of
respectability” failed to challenge the sexual underpinnings of the white power structure.
Whites had long used the threat of violence, especially sexual violence, to terrorize
African Americans into submission to white rule. As Danielle McGuire argued, “As
Frederick Douglas noted nearly a century earlier, the myth of the black man as a rapist
was an ‘invention with a well defined motive.’ The maintenance of white supremacy
relied on both the racial and sexual domination of black men and women.”48 In this
moment of great social upheaval in Charlotte, the forces of sexual violence, political and
economic power, and educational reform came together in a volatile brew simmering just
beneath the surface.

September 4, 1957 marked the public beginning of a slow and often painful
process of school desegregation in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools. The
photographs, plastered across the front page of local and national newspapers, threatened
to shatter the carefully crafted image of Charlotte, North Carolina, as a racially
progressive southern city. The negative publicity generated by these images motivated

48 Danielle L. McGuire, “‘It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped’: Sexual Violence, Community
Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle,” The Journal of American History 91,
(December 2004), 906-955.
the city’s powerful business leaders to band together to prevent such public relations fiascos in the future and consolidate their economic and political control over the Queen City. As the ideological battle between communism and capitalism played out on the international stage, white city fathers in Charlotte were desperate to hide their city’s own racial dirty laundry. The forces of anti-communism, however, cut two ways in the civil rights movement. Black activists attempted to leverage white leaders’ desire to protect the U.S.’s international image to push through reforms. Conversely, white politicians red-baited civil rights activists which threatened to undermine the legitimacy of civil rights activism in the eyes of much of the public. Ultimately, the fervor of anti-communism and cold war hysteria pushed many civil rights organizations to the right politically. In North Carolina, NAACP officials and civil rights leaders including Reginald Hawkins and Kelly Alexander criticized fellow activist’s Robert Williams bold affirmation of black humanity and dignity, and the use of self-defense. In a letter to Kelly Alexander in 1959, Reginald Hawkins strongly intimated that Williams had ties to the Communist Party. “Now within recent months, there has arisen a dark cloud on the horizon in the person of one Mr. Robert Williams of Monroe, North Carolina. I have personally known him for some time now and have cautioned many that he is just a tool by an organization that we want no parts of.”49 In Charlotte, both white city fathers and civil rights activist succumbed to the anti-communist fervor of the period.

49 Cold War politics pressured many civil rights and social reform organizations, most notably the NAACP, to purge leftist leaning members from its ranks. See Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 157-161; and Letter from Rev. R. A. Hawkins to Mr. Kelly Alexander, Box 2, Folder 1, Reginald Armistice Hawkins Papers, Atkins Library, University of North Carolina, [Collection hereafter cited as Hawkins Papers; archive hereafter cited as UNCC.]
Contrary to the image of Charlotte as a racially progressive city, the Queen City made little progress towards substantive school integration during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1957, Dorothy was one of four black students to attend predominantly white schools. However, between 1957 and 1961, only seven black students attended white schools in Charlotte. The school board largely limited integration to schools, like Harding High School, in neighborhoods which had undergone recent racial changes. The 1955 North Carolina Pupil Assignment Act which gave local school boards, rather than the state, control over the public schools allowed the school board to avoid integration while maintaining the guise of racial moderation. It also established very complex procedures for pupil assignments and a similarly vague and cumbersome appeals process for parents who wanted to challenge school assignments. The North Carolina Pupil Assignment Act made it prohibitively difficult for black parents to penetrate the tangled administrative and legal bureaucracy that maintained educational segregation.

Under the shrewd political leadership of Governor Luther Hodges, the state legislature erected even higher barriers to school integration. Adopted into the state constitution in 1956, the Pearsall Plan allowed white residents to shut down the public schools if desegregation occurred. State politicians and media sources hailed the plan as a reasonable alternative to what they considered the extremist threats posed by either the NAACP or the KKK. As William Chafe pointed out in his study of the civil rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, “Indeed the plan was interpreted as the

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50 “Desegregation Here Limited to Grade Schools This Year,” Charlotte Observer, August 30, 1961, p. 5A.
51 Cecelski, Along Freedom Road, 25.
52 Ibid.
quintessence of moderation—a blend, the *Charlotte Observer* noted, of ‘conscience and common sense … an effort to preserve the public schools and at the same time North Carolina’s identity with constitutional government.’”

Like their counterparts across the state, Charlotte school officials quickly latched onto the Pupil Assignment Act as a bulwark against integration. Rather than developing a cohesive system-wide desegregation plan in accordance with *Brown*, the school board sporadically and infrequently approved black students’ requests to attend white schools. This approach allowed the board to control African Americans access to quality educational resources and manage the pace of social change. African American families could never be entirely sure which schools their children would attend, when their transfer requests might be approved, or what environment their children might face in schools from year to year. Additionally, the North Carolina Pupil Assignment Act forced black parents to go to great lengths to secure their legal right to attend integrated schools. In 1960, school board members approved the transfer of just one black student to a predominately white school. At the state level, only 100 black students attended schools with whites in 1961. As school enrollment data reveals, few African Americans in Charlotte successfully enrolled their children in predominantly white schools before the late 1960s.

The pressures for more substantive integration built steadily during the spring and summer of 1961. On April 4, the school board announced its plans to transfer the all-

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55 “Desegregated Schools Open Without Incident,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 1, 1961, p. 5A.
white faculty, staff, and students of Harding High School to a new facility in the Ashley Heights neighborhood.\textsuperscript{56} Although the new building was located just four miles west of Harding, the neighborhood surrounding it was predominately white and middle-class. In contrast, the neighborhood surrounding the old Harding facility had become much more integrated by the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{57} Demands to integrate Harding to match the surrounding neighborhood grew in the late 1950s, and the future of Harding High attracted significant attention from both white and black community organizations.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board’s decision to move its white students and staff from the old Harding building in a racially mixed neighborhood to the Ashley Heights building in an all-white community fit with a long pattern of racially motivated school reassignments during the 1950s and 1960s. Frequent school reassignment plans effectively held back the tide of integration, and threatened to destroy the relationship between black communities and their local schools. Physical relocation also distanced black parents from the educational decision making process, both spatially and emotionally.

Between 1957 and 1961 the school board routinely moved white students and staff out of schools when greater numbers of African Americans moved into the surrounding neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{58} These abandoned schools generally became all-black schools for a short period of time before the school board closed them entirely. The case of First Ward Elementary School provides a particularly telling example of how the

\textsuperscript{56} “Leaders Say Effort ‘Achieved Purpose,’” \textit{Charlotte Observer}, September 14, 1961, p. 5B.
\textsuperscript{58} “School Boycott Leaders Seek,” \textit{Charlotte Observer}, September 8, 1961, p. 4A.
school board deflected pressures for integration and isolated Charlotte’s black students. When pressures for integration at First Ward mounted, whites abandoned the school, and the school board turned the building into administrative offices. In 1957, a wing of the administrative building became classroom space for black students, known as the Alexander Street Annex. After the school board added another unit of all-black classes in 1961, these classes officially became a separate all-black school. In subsequent school board plans in the 1960s, the First Ward School frequently appeared on the list of schools suggested for demolition. The Parks-Hutchinson School and the Zeb Vance Elementary School followed similar patterns. The school board converted both into all-black elementary schools in the early 1960s after the surrounding neighborhood desegregated.

According to the *Charlotte Observer*, “Officials of the school administration and the school board decline to comment on the statements, although they have expressed their satisfaction with the record they have made in providing Negro schools.”

 Increasing numbers of African Americans in Charlotte organized in opposition to such plans because they ignored the educational needs and experiences of African American children. Many black parents, fiercely proud of the educational institutions they had built under segregation, refused to send their children to these abandoned schools. The growing frustrations of the black community with the school board’s record of manipulation and exploitation encouraged them to mobilize in protest of proposed changes at Irwin Avenue Junior High School in the fall of 1961.

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The same pattern held true for many other historically black schools including Alexander Graham Junior High School, Central High School, and Garringer High School.
Years of mistreatment at the hands of the school board combined with a tradition of educational activism to make Charlotte particularly vulnerable to racial unrest and discontent that fall. Shortly after the board announced its intentions to reassign white students to a new building in April, a group of fifty African Americans gathered at a school board meeting to discuss the plan’s impact on black students. Dr. Hawkins spoke to concerned parents and community members about the rumors that the board planned to reassign 800 students from the all-black Northwest Junior High School to Irwin Avenue Junior High. Hawkins condemned the school board’s attempts to prevent integration. “When a neighborhood begins to desegregate and its Negro residents become eligible under the Pupil Assignment Act to apply for admission to an all-white school, the school is abandoned, moved somewhere else, to suburbia.”60 Although the school board claimed that its decision to reassign 800 black students from one all-black school to another was motivated by its concerns with overcrowding at Northwest Junior High, these claims seem unlikely based on the school board’s track record on black education in the 1950s. More likely, the school board used the poor conditions at Northwest as a cover for its ultimate plan to further delay integration. In recent years, school officials had come under increasing pressure from local activists to integrate Harding as the surrounding neighborhood became more racially mixed. Rather than cede to these demands, school officials fell back on the standard practice of relocating white students and staff. School administrators likely hoped that their gestures of concern, however false, for the welfare of Northwest students would appease black activists agitating for integration at Harding.

60 “School Unit Told it is Evading Desegregation Opportunities,” Charlotte Observer, April 19, 1961, p. 1C.
Yet by 1961, Hawkins and others held up Harding High School, site of Dorothy Counts’s 1957 ordeal, as a potential model of integrated education that considered the needs of both white and black students. Hawkins forcefully advocated for complete and voluntary desegregation of Harding High. “It’ll take 20 years for another community to be desegregated like the Harding community has been.”61 The school board’s plan to convert Harding into Irwin Avenue Junior High was particularly frustrating to activists because it targeted the very heart of their organizing efforts. Black parents and community members argued that the board’s decision to send their children to a facility no longer considered good enough for white children sent a message of black inferiority. Such school reassignment plans let black activists know in no uncertain terms that school administrators intended to keep school integration from challenging traditional power relationships between whites and blacks.

During the meeting with the school board, Hawkins also highlighted the gap between America’s stated ideals and the racially discriminatory practices of Charlotte school officials. “Does this school board intend to prove to the world what it says when it raises its hands and swears to uphold the U.S. Constitution and the law of the land?”62 In this case, Hawkins explicitly invoked the specter of the Cold War to warn white elites that black Charlotteans could expose the city’s racial hypocrisy to the world. They hoped that their protests would force city leaders to recognize the gap between their rhetoric and their actions, and spur them to make the necessary changes, whether by choice or under pressure to avoid the public embarrassment of a messy battle over racial justice.

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61 “Only 300 Pupils Attend Irwin First Day,” Charlotte Observer, September 1, 1961, p. 12B.
Charlotte city leaders eagerly sought to attract the out-of-state businesses that had begun to flee northern and Midwestern cities during the 1940s and 1950s. A public showdown over racial justice would certainly damage Charlotte’s image as a socially progressive southern city.

As rumors swirled about the fate of the old Harding High building, a group of African Americans coalesced around their opposition to the school board’s manipulative tactics and their tyrannical control over the public schools. The core group of community activists in the WPC included Reverend Herman Counts (Dorothy Counts’s father), Lilian Jordan, E.H. Ross, Dr. Roy S. Wins, Joseph Hewey, and Dr. Hawkins.63 The WPC drew most of its support from the predominantly African American districts in West Charlotte. The council threatened to boycott Irwin Avenue Junior High if the school board converted the old Harding High building into an all-black junior high. Ultimately, the WPC followed through with its threats and organized a boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High School that lasted for nine days. During this time, school attendance ranged between 217 and 457 of a total 800 enrolled students.64 However, school enrollment data alone presents a very shallow and distorted picture of the WPC and their boycott of Irwin. A full rendering must consider issues of neighborhood organizing, black political empowerment and the power of minorities in a pluralistic society.

The WPC outlined several specific issues in their critique of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education and School Board. Primarily, they argued that the

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63 “Negroes, Schoolmen Divided,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 11, 1961, p. 1B.
64 “Attendance at Irwin Near Peak,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 12, 1961, p. 6A
The boycott lasted from August 30 through September 13, 1961.
school board’s student reassignment plans for Harding High violated the orders of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Activists asserted that the school board used the North Carolina Pupil Assignment Act to ignore the Supreme Court’s orders. The council listed three conditions under which they would agree to end the boycott. First, the school board could reassign all 800 black students back to their old school, Northwest Junior High. Dr. Hawkins echoed the sentiments of many African Americans when he said, “The Negro people are willing to suffer the inconvenience of double sessions to avoid the humiliation as human beings the school board has put on us by moving the white students out of Harding and segregating us there.”

Secondly, the WPC agreed to call off protests if the school board created a new student reassignment plan which made measurable progress towards school integration. Lastly, the school board could complete the new all-black junior high school in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood which had been promised nearly two years earlier. “It’s one thing for Negroes to attend an all-Negro school in an all-Negro community, and it’s quite another for them to have to attend an all-Negro school white students have just vacated in a desegregated area,” Hawkins said.

This demand illustrates some of the intellectual and methodological complexities of the WPC and the school boycott. Beyond integration, which followed numerical standards or racial ratios, they demanded school integration plans that protected the strong bonds between African American communities and their local schools.

On August 1, 1961 the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School board met to discuss the fate of the old Harding High building in downtown Charlotte. That morning the board

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65 Box 1, Folder 11, Hawkins Papers, UNCC.
officially announced its plans to convert the building into an all-black junior high school, which would be renamed Irwin Avenue Junior High School. The rumors had been true after all. According to the *Charlotte Observer*, the decision “was necessary, the board said, in order to relieve the overcrowding of Northwest Junior High, where 1,600 students were expected and where double sessions had been held for three years.”67 While Northwest did suffer from overcrowding, many African Americans rightfully doubted the sincerity of the school board’s motives. Upon hearing the news, Hawkins and twenty-one other members of the WPC jumped into action. They marched outside the school board office with signs that read “School Board, Stop Dehumanizing Our Children-Desegregate” and “Seven Years is Too Long to Wait-Desegregate.” As these signs illustrate, activists not only wanted integrated schools but educational communities that fulfilled their children’s academic and emotional needs. Other members of the group canvassed the surrounding Fairview, Greenville, Biddlesville, and University Park neighborhoods to encourage parents to return their reassignment notices to the school board unopened.

After months of threats and protests from Hawkins and the WPC, Kelly Alexander, State President of the NAACP finally joined the fight against the school board. Alexander favored a legalistic approach to civil rights activism that relied on the courts and the appeal process to challenge segregated school assignments. Although Hawkins and Alexander embraced quite different protest methods, the two men came together, at least officially, in support of the integration of Irwin Avenue Junior High

67 Ibid.
School. On August 9, 1961 the *Charlotte Observer* reported, “Alexander, state president of the NAACP, said Tuesday that as soon as the Board of Education assigns the all-Negro student body to the school, his group will ask parents of the students to petition for reassignment.” The article continued to say, “Alexander said his goal in the move will be have the Irwin Avenue school desegregated and to exhaust all legal remedies before taking other action. If the reassignment requests are denied, Alexander said, taking the case to court is ‘a possibility.’”68 Unlike Alexander, Hawkins favored direct actions against the school board such as protests, marches, and boycotts. While Hawkins frequently confronted the school board and city politicians on their racially discriminatory actions, Alexander consistently chose an approach based on legal appeals. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, black activists representing different segments of the community embraced various tactics including direct action, legal challenges, economic boycotts, and moral appeals. Ultimately, success in this fight would require a full arsenal of tactics.

Kelly Alexander and Dr. Hawkins shared a common commitment to end racial discrimination through activism. Beginning in the late 1940s, Dr. Hawkins and Kelly Alexander often worked together in their efforts to end segregation in public places and to challenge white elite’s political, economic, and social control over the city.69 Looking back on his civil rights activism, Hawkins described Kelly Alexander’s influence on his

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69 Rev. Dr. Reginald Armistice Hawkins, interview by Joe Mosnier, June 5, 1995, interview A-0380, Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical Collection, Center for the Study of the American South, Chapel Hill, NC. [Interview hereafter cited as Hawkins interview; collection hereafter cited as SOHP.]
early career, as well as the increasing differences between their methodologies during the 1960s. “I think that he had a tremendous effect on my civil rights activity. I’d follow him around…but his brand was different. I said we need to do direct action. These white folks aren’t going to yield anything unless it’s taken from them. We had to get out there and fight.” Hawkins continued, “That was a Frederick Douglass attitude. Nothing had been given without struggle. But Kelly believed that by exposing and condemning over the press or radio or television that we would bring these people down. But that’s not the way it happened.”  

Although Hawkins felt that Kelly Alexander’s approach was too timid, he respected his efforts because of his genuine commitment to the cause of racial equality.

Dr. Hawkins found himself at distinctly greater odds with Kelly’s brother, Fred Alexander, a local real estate developer and real estate agent. Like his brother, Fred Alexander rejected the more public direct actions employed by Hawkins in favor of less confrontational tactics such as negotiations and legal appeals. However, unlike the State NAACP President, Alexander worked closely with whites in both official and unofficial capacities. He directly critiqued Dr. Hawkins’s brand of direct action activism. In a 1964 interview, Alexander reflected, “Some feel the scare technique will work. It’s stupid to think you scare people who build 50-story buildings. You can be a nuisance. It’s a matter of whether I want to listen to you and see if there is sense in what you say.”

While he did not refer to Dr. Hawkins explicitly here, the allusion is clear.

70 Ibid.
Dr. Hawkins and Fred Alexander also differed on the role of whites in the civil rights movement. While Dr. Hawkins made efforts to gain the support of the white working-class in Charlotte, Alexander firmly rejected such interracial working class alliances.\textsuperscript{72} “You can’t get anywhere dealing with the poor white man,” he said. “He’s just like the Negro--struggling.”\textsuperscript{73} Instead, Alexander looked to inside channels of negotiation with white businessmen. While Hawkins spoke of his great respect and appreciation for Kelly Alexander and his contributions to the movement, he considered Fred Alexander a political opportunist who conspired with upper-class whites to exploit the black community.\textsuperscript{74}

The 1961 mayoral election provides a useful example of the clash between Dr. Hawkins and Fred Alexander over this issue of class in civil rights activism. Alexander endorsed former Chamber of Commerce Chair Stanford Brookshire while Hawkins supported Martha Evans, a white woman with strong support from labor groups and the African American community. The political establishment and local media’s opposition to Evans illustrates the strength of the male-centered business interests in city politics. In its endorsement of Brookshire, the \textit{Charlotte Observer} expressed its “doubts that ‘she, as mayor, could work closely and harmoniously with the Council.’” As Samuel Smith argued, “it is difficult to view these doubts as expressing anything other than the difficulty that Charlotte’s overwhelmingly male political and business establishment had in dealing with an assertive, intellectually formidable, and politically savvy woman.” In

\textsuperscript{72} Smith, \textit{Boom for Whom?}, 40.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{74} Hawkins interview, SOHP.
the struggle to gain greater political power, gender and racial stereotypes erected and maintained by white city fathers threatened to thwart the efforts of black educational activists. Conversely, Brookshire’s unabashedly pro-business, anti-labor policies endeared him to few black or working-class Charlotteans. Aside from Fred Alexander, Brookshire received very little support from black communities in the 1961 election, securing just seven percent of the African American vote in the predominantly African American Northwest district.75

In addition to their methodological differences, the Alexanders and Dr. Hawkins had very different conceptions of the role ordinary black people should play in the movement. Mayoral committees and negotiations with business elites favored by the Alexanders offered little opportunity for large numbers of African Americans to play a role in the educational decision making process. While Fred Alexander’s access to Charlotte’s inner circle likely improved the position of some segments of the African American community, this approach rarely empowered average African Americans to actively confront injustice in their own lives. In contrast, the WPC consciously drew on the support of rank and file African Americans, and encouraged parents and community members to harness their collective power to affect change.

However, a comparison of these three men reveals more than just the dynamics of their personal relationships. As their conflicts and alliances show, methods and ideology of civil rights activism in Charlotte did not always fall along class, race, or gender lines. If some members of the black middle class sought to distance themselves from working

75 Smith, *Boom for Whom?*, 36 and 37.
class blacks, as the example of Fred Alexander makes clear, the boundaries between the groups were rarely that simple. Any analysis of class divisions within the black community must consider the role powerful white business and political leaders in Charlotte played in encouraging such divisions. In many cases white city fathers actively sought to promote fissures both within the black population and the working class to shore up their own control over the political, social, and economic order. Nevertheless, during the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans publicly asserted the need for social and racial change, and their right to have a role in that process. Increasingly, the public schools became a battleground in this conflict over the pace and direction of change. As the ideologies and tactics of Dr. Hawkins and Fred Alexander illustrated, members of the same black middle class divided on the issue. Comparing Hawkins and Kelly Alexander shows that even committed social activists could and did embrace alternative strategies.

Many parents, students, and community members sided with Hawkins. They publicly rejected the orders of the school board and the status quo of black education in Charlotte. Hawkins and other members of the WPC urged families of reassigned students not to report to the new Irwin Avenue Junior High. On the first day of school many African Americans followed the council’s lead; only 328 of the 800 students went to class on Thursday, August 30.

The next day, the school board informed African American parents that the deadline to apply for a school transfer had expired, and they would not consider any

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77 “Attendance at Irwin Near Peak,” Charlotte Observer, September 13, 1961, p. 6A.
transfer requests. Despite this, 500 students unsuccessfully attempted to reenroll at Northwest Junior High that Friday. Principal C.E. Moreland encouraged the students and their families to follow the formal appeal procedure and fill out transfer applications to return to Northwest. Dr. Hawkins, however, rejected the use of this appeal process as an ineffectual piecemeal response to institutionalized discrimination. According to the *Charlotte Observer*, “Hawkins has claimed that this process puts Negro parents under unfair pressure because of their fear of the law, because of their unfamiliarity with the steps and forms necessary for applying, and because applying publicly leaves them open to economic pressures by employers.”78 Hawkins’s statements illustrate his desire to cultivate protest methods that operated outside of the machinery of the white controlled public school administration. Moreover, he recognized and sympathized with the unstable economic situation of many black Charlotteans which made it practically difficult for them to agitate for civil rights.

Economic and physical reprisals against African Americans who spoke out against the white power structure were a cruel reality of the post-*Brown* South.79 Indeed, white supremacists and vigilantes targeted Hawkins and his own family during this time period. Looking back on his experiences in Charlotte as a child, Dr. Hawkins son, Abdullah Salim, recalled the constant threat of violence from the Klan. “You also have to remember that at that time the Ku Klux Klan was very active. A lot of the activities that the Klan undertook were such that the local authorities, the law enforcement

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authorities, acquiesced, if not participated in a lot of the activities going on.” Salim continued, “So for that reason they had free hand to do whatever they wanted. So intimidation was rampant.” These comments illustrate the pervasiveness of violence in the maintenance of segregation. Despite this, many people fought against the racial and social hierarchy which restricted African Americans access to political and economic power. Fundamentally, members of the WPC sought a practical, if risky, model of social activism that would affirm the value of African American people and bring about substantive change.

Dr. Chris Folk, longtime staff member for the Superintendent, asserted that activists should not rely on the administrative appeal process and announced that the board would not accept any transfer requests. Even so, later the same day, Dr. Hawkins asked Dr. Folk to have application forms available for parents. The reason for Hawkins’s apparent shift on this issue remains unclear. It is possible that he felt pressure from other segments of the black community including the NAACP and Principal Moreland. Perhaps in light of the school board’s announcement that it would not accept transfer requests, he saw this as an opportunity to further highlight the dysfunction of the public school system. Regardless, Hawkins pushed forward in his challenge of the school board’s discriminatory practices. “But we’re going to get 800 names for them (board members). If they don’t have that many forms we’ll write them in a list. We’ll show them that this is no ‘small irresponsible group.’ We’re serious about this thing.”

80 Abdullah Salim, telephone interview with author, April 13, 2007. [Hereafter cited as Salim interview].
Hawkins’s assertions of legitimacy and collective strength speak to the difficulties grassroots activists like the WPC faced in being taken seriously by white leaders. When confronted by black protests, white leaders frequently claimed that the problems had been caused by so-called troublemakers rather than acknowledging the economic and political inequities which fueled black discontent. In response, black activists, like those involved in the boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High worked diligently to build up their activist networks and attract more supporters to their cause.82

Reginald Hawkins and the WPC recognized the need to build a broad base of community support for the school boycott. On Sunday, September 3, Hawkins spoke at two meetings at the Clarkson Street Mission, a local community aid organization in downtown Charlotte, in an effort to increase the visibility of the movement. During the meeting Hawkins spoke passionately of his frustrations with the school board’s discriminatory treatment of African Americans. Referring to Dorothy Counts’s attempts to integrate Harding High School Hawkins said, “Harding High was too good for her then, but it’s all right for us now.” In a biting critique of the hypocrisy of the school board’s actions he went on to say, “Only this time they changed the name of the school, lest we Negroes by going to school there desecrate that name.”83 Throughout this meeting and over the course of the school boycott, the WPC encouraged fellow black Charlotteans to stand up against the board’s treatment of African Americans and assert their place as equal citizens worthy of respect and humanity.

82 See Greene, Our Separate Ways.
Dr. Hawkins also emphasized the collective economic power of African Americans in his plans to publicize black discontent at the upcoming North Carolina Trade Fair in October. “I plan to write letters to President Kennedy and the President of Mexico and Finland, all who may attend the Trade Fair and explain to them our protest and tell them that all is not fair in Charlotte. Businessmen in this city have warned me against causing embarrassment during the trade fair. But what do they know of embarrassment? We have been embarrassed all of our lives.”

Again, Hawkins threatened to expose systemic racial discrimination in Charlotte in the midst of the Cold War, and attempted to bring international pressure to bear on city leaders. However, in the aftermath of the failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 and the rising tensions between the Soviet Union and the U.S., the Kennedy administration likely brushed Hawkins’s threats aside. While the Charlotte Observer characterized his speech as vitriolic, Hawkins words and tone illustrate the sincere and fervent desire of African Americans in Charlotte to be treated with respect by white leaders.

Hawkins also encouraged his fellow African Americans to hold Charlotte’s leaders accountable for closing the gap between their rhetoric and treatment of their minority citizens. While Brookshire and other white city leaders frequently expressed their concern for African Americans in public, behind closed doors they pursued policies which marginalized African Americans socially, economically, and politically. On August 7, 1961, Brookshire urged his fellow Charlotteans to “substitute reason for prejudice in the matter of race relations,” and outlined his plans to improve African

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American’s access to quality public resources such as schools and health care. The mayor painted a picture of interracial cooperation in Charlotte. “What in the life of Charlotte is good or bad for them [African Americans] is good or bad for our city.”

However, as the events surrounding the creation of the Committee on Community Relations illustrate, Mayor Brookshire’s administration could hardly be considered a friend to the black community. School officials also knowingly misled black activists about future school development plans. Administrators frequently pointed to their plans to build a new all-black junior high on Statesville Road as proof of their commitment to black education. However, the plans for Statesville Junior High, originally announced in 1959, remained stalled in the initial stages for more than two years. The board of education did not even approve the purchase of the land for the new school until August 1961. Even then, the purchase of the school site was subject to the approval of the Board of County Commissioners. The WPC and Hawkins frequently pointed to the conflict surrounding the building of Statesville Junior High as an example of school officials’ mistreatment of African Americans in the public schools.

The school boycott gained strength over Labor Day weekend, and on Tuesday, September 5, only 217 students came to school. During the next week, members of the school board increased their efforts to pressure the WPC and its supporters to end the boycott. David Harris, Vice Chairman of the board, threatened to punish the children and the boycott leaders under the state’s compulsory education laws. The school board’s

85 “Brookshire: ‘Substitute Reason for Prejudice’” Charlotte Observer, September 8, 1961, p. 4A.
86 “Purchase of School Site Ok’d,” Charlotte Observer, August 2, 1961, p. 6A.
threats in this case diverge from the pattern of behavior of most school officials who rarely enforced compulsory attendance laws for black students. White elite opposition to public education for the black working class dates back to the post-Emancipation period when. Planters opposed compulsory education laws and any other expansion of the public school system which would have weakened their economic control over laborers.88

Local white media sources also spoke out against the school boycott, the WPC, and Dr. Hawkins. In an article on September 4, the Charlotte Observer mocked Hawkins’s critiques of school officials at a mass meeting of African American community members. “His approach was essentially emotional, as he heaped abuse on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education and attacked some of its members with personal insults.” The article continued, “His major tactic there was ridicule as he recited what he called ‘lies’ and hypocrisy’ by the school board.”89 These descriptions portrayed Hawkins as overly emotional, politically incompetent, and essentially childlike in his leadership of the boycott. Certainly, the man described in this article was not someone white city fathers would take seriously. Two days later an editorial in the Observer issued another scathing attack on Hawkins, painting him as a wildly erratic, manipulative politician hell-bent on achieving personal glory. “Either Dr. Hawkins has not thought about the injustice to the children involved or he is callously using them as pawns in his extra-legal fight to shatter a system he finds unsupportable.”90 The hypocrisy of describing Hawkins’s efforts to integrate Harding High in compliance with

89 “Hawkins Heaps Abuse on School Officials, Charlotte Observer, September 4, 1961, p. 1C.
the Supreme Court’s ruling in Brown as “extralegal” can not be overlooked. In reality it was white politicians and school officials who had historically employed extralegal tactics to prevent African Americans from exercising their constitutional rights as citizens. Rather than placing the school boycott within the broader context of the movement for social and racial justice, this article relied heavily upon racial stereotypes of black activism to present a distorted picture of the boycott. The Observer rarely challenged the underlying socioeconomic hierarchy in Charlotte which privileged wealthy white men. The white media in Charlotte seldom linked the conflicts over school segregation with the battle for control over black education and Charlotte’s social structure more generally. African Americans activists, however, clearly saw how white elites had consistently used their power over black schools to maintain a racialized social, political, and economic hierarchy.

While the school board and local white leaders lampooned Hawkins as a power-hungry political opportunist, the WPC also intensified its fight for equality and respect in the public schools. On Thursday the 7, one week into the boycott, activists canvassed neighborhoods in West Charlotte to build support for their cause. Council members passed out 10,000 pamphlets entitled, “A Statement of Facts as to Why Negro Parents Are Boycotting and Protesting Old Harding School.” The pamphlet outlined their grievances with the Charlotte School Board and their demands for reconciliation. Addressed to “Parents and friends for freedom,” it detailed the group’s opposition to school officials’ treatment of African Americans. The tone of the pamphlet mirrored the style and language of national civil rights organizations like the Southern Christian
Leadership Conference and local movements like the Montgomery Bus Boycott. “For our cause is right and we shall win in the end. Let us say to the world that Negroes in Charlotte can stand together and fight the common enemy of injustice instead of one another. Let us march on until freedom is won.” The Council also drew upon the arguments laid out by Chief Justice Warren in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

“Segregation generates a feeling of inferiority as to the status of our children in this community and it affects the hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” The pamphlet also spoke to the specific grievances of the council members and denounced the school board’s practice of reassigning white students to newer all-white facilities when pressures for desegregation increased. Council members targeted neighborhoods in West Charlotte going door to door organizing their protest and recruiting supporters. Their brand of grassroots activism illustrated their confidence that dedicated individuals could affect change.

As council members worked the neighborhoods, Dr. Hawkins turned to the public arena to vocalize the black community’s discontent and shed light on the inequality in public education. Although State NAACP President Kelly Alexander had pledged institutional support in August, Hawkins continued to emphasize the independent and local nature of the boycott. Referring to the NAACP and other national civil rights organization in a speech on September 6 Hawkins said, “We don’t want their help. We are just a group of local parents who don’t want old Harding High thrust down our throats

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91 “School Boycott Leaders Seek,” *Charlotte Observer*, September 8, 1961, p. 4A.
as a segregated school.”  His comments reveal not only the importance of community solidarity in the civil rights movement in Charlotte, but also the widening rift between local groups such as the WPC and national organizations like the NAACP. Although Dr. Hawkins maintained a friendly relationship with Kelly Alexander throughout his life, during the 1960s, he moved away from the NAACP in favor of activism focused on political empowerment.  

Moreover, Hawkins rejected the media’s characterization of him as a heavy-handed leader. Instead he emphasized the collective, broad-based nature of the movement. In response to threats from the school board that leaders of the movement could be jailed for their violation of the North Carolina Pupil Assignment Law, Hawkins said, “As for going to jail, that’s the kind of thing that makes martyrs that made Martin Luther King in Alabama.” He continued, “I don’t want that kind of power. I didn’t even want to lead this protest, but these parents out here told me they had nobody else.”

Although Hawkins’s leadership style and personality walked a very fine line between bold and grandiose, other WPC members attested to his version of events. At a lengthy meeting between the Charlotte Board of Education and black community leaders on September 12, Lilian Jordan spoke of the grassroots nature of the Westside Parents Council and school boycott. Jordan, president of the PTA at the all-black West Charlotte High School described how the council grew out of West Charlotte High School’s PTA

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93 Hawkins interview, SOHP.
94 Ibid.
with the support of the school administration.\textsuperscript{95} Jordan said that the PTA asked Dr. Hawkins to assume leadership of the movement on several occasions before he finally consented. “But the point is, we parents started this thing, not Dr. Hawkins. On behalf of our children, not for any political or personal gains.”\textsuperscript{96} The relationship between the Parent Teachers Association (PTA), West Charlotte High School, and the WPC illustrates the central role women played in the boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High and grassroots black educational activism in Charlotte. Women figured centrally in the leadership of the PTA. Moreover, teaching, in both its formal and informal applications, had historically been a sphere of female influence. Jordan’s explicit invocation of children’s interests, fundamentally a mother’s argument, further reinforces the gendered nature of educational activism during the civil rights movement. In contrast to the top-down, patriarchal leadership style of national civil rights organizations, the WPC embraced an egalitarian, collective activist model. Parents and community members in West Charlotte understood intimately the importance of education in shaping future life opportunities and built a distinctive model of activism which empowered average citizens to become their own advocates.

Moving into the second full week of the boycott, both African American activists and school administration officials increased their efforts to bring the conflict to a conclusion and claim victory for their respective sides. On Sunday September 10, Hawkins and six other black community activists met with four members of the Charlotte Board of Education to discuss the boycott. In a tense showdown, black representatives

\textsuperscript{95} “Irwin School Meeting Clears Air a Little,” \textit{Charlotte Observer}, September 13, 1961, p. 6A.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
repeated their demands and urged the board to develop a desegregation plan which made significant progress toward integration. Board members promised to complete the new Statesville Avenue Junior High by the fall of 1962, but refused to concede on any of the other points. The stress of the last several months surrounding the boycott continued to build.

The board of education’s responses frustrated members of the Westside Parents Council, and emotions ran particularly high at a mass meeting held by the council at the Statesville Avenue Presbyterian Church later that Sunday afternoon. Speaking to a crowd of 400 people, Hawkins warned the city that the WPC would extend the protest to all black schools in the system if the school board did not meet their demands. “If the school board doesn’t yield soon, we’ll call on every Negro parent in the City of Charlotte to join us in this protest.” Hawkins condemned the board of education’s attempts to weaken the movement by creating divisions within the WPC. “He [Board Vice Chairman David W. Harris] had been telling his white friends all over town he’d never talk to me. And he tried not to. Through Ross there [WPC member E.H. Ross] and some others, he tried to break us up and get around me.”

Hawkins and members of the WPC understood that in order for their movement to succeed they had to gather broad support and foster a sense of shared purpose among parents and community members.

In another meeting between school officials and black community members two days later, WPC members described how Irwin Avenue Junior High symbolized the city’s resistance to integration and racial equality. Dr. Hawkins argued that the old Harding

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School building held special significance for black Charlotteans because it was one of the city’s first integrated schools. Fellow council member E. H. Ross pled with the school board to create a system-wide desegregation plan, arguing: “If we know what’s around the corner, we aren’t afraid.” Many African Americans shared Ross’ sentiments that the school board and board of education had an obligation to solicit black input on integration and inform parents of any impending changes well in advance. However, time and time again white school officials and politicians ignored black Charlotteans’ pleas to be treated as equal citizens worthy of respect and consideration.

After weeks of meetings, protests, and marches, the demands of the WPC remained unmet, and no end to the boycott appeared in sight. As the boycott threatened to extend into its third week, Mayor Stanford Brookshire stepped in to resolve the conflict and protect the city from the embarrassment of this increasingly public and politically damaging conflict. Brookshire formed the CCR to address the complaints of the WPC. The committee resolved to handle the current conflict and all future issues related to minority education. However, the committee’s pledges ultimately did little to help black Charlotteans because it represented the interests of the white-controlled city government. Throughout his eight years as mayor, Brookshire frequently created committees to diffuse racially volatile situations. While these committees successfully negated an end to several racial conflicts and shielded the city from negative publicity, they rarely yielded to black activists demands or fostered social change. Fred Alexander’s earlier support for Brookshire and the white business community paid off.

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98 “Irwin School Meeting Clears Air a Little,” Charlotte Observer, September 13, 1961, p. 6A.
99 Ibid.

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Shortly after winning the election, Brookshire appointed him to the committee. Not surprisingly, Hawkins’s bold critiques of city government did not endear him to the new mayor who excluded him from the committee.\textsuperscript{100} By appointing Fred Alexander to the committee, Brookshire virtually guaranteed continued white control over racial politics and public education. Although Alexander’s place on the committee gave the appearance of greater political access and representation for African Americans, his appointment left him beholden to the mayor and thus unable to challenge the racial and socioeconomic status quo.

Committee members quickly got to work drafting a plan of action which would end the boycott. On September 12, the committee released a resolution which encouraged for cooperation between boycott leaders and school officials, and called for the WPC to end the boycott. “We believe both groups are seeking the best solution to their problems. We further express the hope that the children involved will not be denied attendance at school throughout the current year.” However, the language of the committee’s resolution failed to address activists underlying frustrations with their blatantly disrespectful treatment they received at the hands of white school officials. “The Mayor’s Community Relations Committee has noted with interest and concern the problems now confronting both Negro parents and the School Board with reference to the allocation of pupils in the neighborhood of the Irwin Avenue School.”\textsuperscript{101} Following the resolution Hawkins announced the council’s decision saying, “We are allowing a cooling off period. The organization will be kept intact. We are allowing our elected officials to

\textsuperscript{100} Smith, \textit{Boom for Whom?}, 37 and 41.
\textsuperscript{101} “Negroes Call Off School Boycott,” \textit{Charlotte Observer}, September 14, 1961, p. 2C.
consider the legitimate protests from Negroes, to do that which is just and fair.”102 Sadly, the mayoral committee proved to be little more than window dressing, and made little substantive progress towards addressing the educational needs of African Americans in Charlotte.

Although the WPC failed to achieve its immediate objectives, the school boycott represented a significant moment in African Americans’ battle for recognition and power in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools. Unfortunately one of the greatest strengths of the WPC, its emphasis on the needs of the local community, proved a significant liability in this battle against the deeply entrenched status quo of educational politics. Despite the efforts of WPC members, they failed to garner enough support outside of West Charlotte to pressure politicians like Mayor Brookshire to take their demands seriously. Without significant citywide support, it proved nearly impossible for activists to bring down the white power structure. Although Hawkins attempted to attract national and even international attention to their cause with his threats to write letters to President Kennedy and several international figures, he never held enough political capital to make good on these, and white elites called his bluff. Additionally, the creation of the mayor’s committee dealt a virtual death blow to the WPC’s movement. The committee clearly had no intention of actually addressing the problems of racial discrimination in the public schools and the systematic degradation of black students, but its existence made it difficult for Hawkins and others to argue that city leaders ignored their voices.

Moreover, Fred Alexander’s appointment to the committee made him the so-called

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official voice of the black community, and greatly weakened Hawkins and the WPC. Faced with these grim circumstances the WPC likely recognized the political infeasibility of continuing with the boycott.

Still, the boycott taught the members of the WPC, Hawkins, and future activists in Charlotte important lessons about strategy and leadership in their battle for access to excellent educational opportunities. Mayor Brookshire’s clever political maneuverings with the creation of CCR likely made future activists wary of alliances with white politicians and interracial committees that pledged to address concerns of African Americans. As the conflicts over desegregation picked up steam in the mid-1960s, greater numbers of activists looked to protest methods which operated outside of the boundaries of white-controlled institutions. The showdown with Brookshire likely taught the WPC and Hawkins that local politicians could not be trusted to act in the best interests of the black community. Moreover, Fred Alexander’s appointment to the committee and his apparent indifference to the needs of average black Charlotteans widened preexisting fissures within the black community over the best approach to black educational activism. Lastly, protestors learned the importance of building a broad base of support, one which crossed racial and class lines.
“White Charlotte, wake up! Don’t repeat your mistakes. Insist upon the same justice, dignity, and humanity for every man that you want for yourself.”

On July 31, 1969 Marilyn Belk, an African American teenager, stood in front of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board and delivered a powerful message to a packed room of anxious Charlotteans. “If Second Ward is closed, I will not attend school. You owe me, Marilyn Belk, a citizen of Charlotte, an education and if you tear down Second Ward there will no longer be an education.” Belk’s words exemplified the powerful emotions many Black Charlotteans felt for Second Ward High School. The thought of attending a high school other than “theirs” invoked feelings of passionate disbelief.

On August 2, 1,200 protestors marched through downtown Charlotte to Second Ward High School. Each of these protestors made the decision to join this movement based on their own personal experiences with race and education. Perhaps their mother or father had attended Second Ward High School. Maybe, as in the case of Madelyn Wilson, their “family came out of Second Ward.” Or perhaps a relative had attended one of the many black schools in Charlotte shut down by the school board in the past twenty years. Whatever the specifics, personal connections and commitments played a large role in any individual’s decision to lay his or her convictions on the line and join a movement. The creation of successful community protest movements depended on the


105 Madelyn Wilson, telephone interview with author, April 9, 2007, Charlotte, North Carolina. [Hereafter cited as Wilson interview.]
cultivation of personal ties and a sense of shared purpose amongst participants which in turn gave participants a clear goal around which to organize and unify.
Figure 4. Protestors march down Trade Street, Charlotte, 1969.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{106} Charlotte Observer.
Yet, the broader context of the history of black education at the local, regional, and even national level also shaped black Charlotteans reactions to the school board’s plans. Black high schools had long occupied a central place in communities not only as educational institutions, but also as meeting places for a wide range of local events. Schools were a source of racial pride and solidarity, in the otherwise harsh landscape of the segregated South. Viewed in this light, it is not at all surprising that the destruction of Second Ward High elicited such a strong reaction from the black community. Still, the question remains why and how did the long standing conflict between the black community and the white-controlled Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board reach this crescendo of community protest in the summer of 1969? And how, once faced with this crisis, did black Charlotteans respond?

Between 1964 and 1969, national legislation, judicial rulings, and black community activism brought enormous changes to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the local desegregation suit, Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, put the school board under considerable pressure to desegregate schools. In response, the school board created a series of desegregation plans in 1965, 1966, and 1969 which inflamed already seething tensions between black Charlotteans and the white power structure. The black community’s response to these plans ushered in a new cadre of leaders and an increasingly youthful and working-class participant base. By the time schools opened in the fall of 1970, the black community had fought and lost, at least in physical terms, a prolonged battle over

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107 See Cecelski, Along Freedom Road.
the closure of fourteen more black schools. However, the protests of the mid to late 1960s had given a new generation of younger leaders the organizing experience they would need to wage the next battle in this long war for quality and equality in the public schools. Moreover, the rights of black students had become the focal point of the black community’s activism. Black Charlotteans had fine-tuned their critique of the white controlled public schools and sent school officials a clear message: they would not accept school integration plans which came at the expense of black educational traditions and institutions.

African Americans’ battle for school integration received a huge boost from the federal government with the passage of the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964. After more than ten years of foot dragging and evading Brown, the passage of the act on July 2, 1964 finally put real pressure on southern school districts to desegregate the schools. At the time of the act’s passage, “only about 3 percent of the more than twenty thousand African American children in the school system were assigned to a majority white school.”108

The act addressed the enforcement of civil rights in a wide range of facilities and gave the federal government the power to involve itself directly in the protection of the civil rights of citizens.109

Title IV of the Civil Rights Act, “Desegregation of Public Education,” pertained most directly to the problem of racial segregation in the public schools. The act’s definition of desegregation in Sec. 401 had profound implications for the litigation of

cases dealing with school desegregation throughout the South, and specifically in *Swann v. Mecklenburg*. The Civil Rights Act defined desegregation as “the assignment of students to public schools and within such schools without regard to their race, color, religion, or national origin, but “desegregation” shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance.” This definition of desegregation seemingly endorsed a “color blind” approach to pupil assignments. However, as the history of urban development and the public schools in much of the nation illustrates, so-called color blind assignments inevitably led to racially segregated schools because of the patterns of extreme residential segregation in many cities.

Charlotte was certainly no exception to this pattern, with much of the city’s African American population living in neighborhoods in the western and northwestern part of the city, and the concentration of wealthy whites in the ultra-exclusive neighborhoods of south and southeast Charlotte.  

Ultimately, however, it was the Civil Rights Act’s implicit threat to revoke federal government funding from non-compliant programs that caught the attention of the school board and school officials, and sparked action. Perhaps not surprisingly, only financial disincentives could force the school board to action.  

Less than six months later, the school board came under greater pressure to begin to desegregate with the release of the U.S. Office of Education of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare’s (HEW) preliminary guidelines for compliance with the CRA.  “The 1965 guidelines required all school districts with a history of school

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111 Civil Rights Act of 1964.
segregation to formulate a voluntary school desegregation plan. If a school board failed to comply, it could lose its federal funding."¹¹² These guidelines gave the federal government greater oversight of the process of school desegregation, and the power to punish school districts which failed to meet their constitutional obligations.

Almost simultaneously with the release of the HEW guidelines, black Charlotteans, eager to leverage the newfound support of the federal government, filed suit against the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board for its purposeful maintenance of racially segregated schools. On January 19, 1965, Darius and Vera Swann filed suit against the board’s pupil assignment plans because they discriminated against African American students by preventing them from attending integrated schools. Julius Chambers, a young civil rights attorney who had recently established private practice in Charlotte, acted as the lead counsel on this case represented by the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.¹¹³ The Swanns filed suit on behalf of several African American families with children in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools, including Reginald Hawkins. The school board denied the Swanns’ appeal of their son James’s assignment to the all-black Biddlesville Elementary School. The board refused to allow James to attend the predominantly white Seversville Elementary School, closer to their home. Instead, the board insisted that he attend the all-black Biddlesville Elementary School, which was farther away. After the board denied an additional personal request,

¹¹² Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 113.
the Swanns chose to sue the school board rather than following the transfer request process outlined by the Pearsall Plan.114

With the Swann case in its preliminary stages and facing increased government oversight, the school system finally moved to create a school desegregation plan. In reality, the plan barely feigned an attempt at desegregation and failed to meet the minimum guidelines set by the CRA and the HEW. On March 11, 1965, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education released a new student assignment plan which assigned students according to geographic zones. The board proposed non-racial assignments for ninety-nine of the system’s 109 schools, excluding ten historically black schools from the plan altogether. The board justified this plan, which clearly violated the guidelines established by Title IV, by saying that they planned to replace these ten schools in the near future with new facilities. Therefore, they claimed, it would be in the best interest of the students to exclude these schools from desegregation plans in the meantime to reduce the number of educational disruptions. The school board pledged to have all schools included in desegregation plans by the fall of 1967.115

The plan enraged the black community and elicited stiff protests from the plaintiffs in Swann. The exclusion of ten black schools meant the explicit continuation of racially segregated school assignments for twenty-five percent of African American students in the system.116 Moreover, the school board’s announcement of even more closures of black schools seemed a direct affront to black educational traditions and the

114 Ibid, 111.
5,115 African American students attended these ten schools.
115 Ibid, 114.
116 Ibid.
right of the black community to have a voice in the school reform process. Either way, it did not bode well for the future of school desegregation in Charlotte. With each subsequent desegregation plan created by the school board over the course of the next eight years, it became increasingly clear that the board intended to send the black community messages about its place, or lack thereof, in the city’s socioeconomic structure. Despite this, various elements of the black community in Charlotte continued to mobilize in opposition to racially discriminatory desegregation plans that ignored their needs and input.

Less than a year later, the school board released yet another inflammatory desegregation plan, which elicited a new wave of black educational activism. In April, 1966, the school board finally ended the use of explicitly race-based pupil assignment plans, in accordance with the HEW’s most recent guidelines. However, the presence of substantial residential segregation in Charlotte meant that geographically-based assignments virtually ensured racially segregated schools. The school board avoided this entire dilemma by simply closing seven black schools. Rather than assigning students based on their race to eliminate segregation, which would have meant assigning white students to black schools, the school board took advantage of the black community’s lack of political power to push through yet another plan maintaining the status quo.117

Black Charlotteans quickly mounted a counterattack against this most recent affront on their educational traditions. On May 17, 1966, a group of black leaders, headed by Reverend Arthur J. White, sent a petition to the school board listing their

117 Ibid, 123.
complaints with the treatment of black students in the public schools and the board’s handling of the desegregation process. In their petition, the group specifically rejected the board’s proposed closures. Once again, the retention of historically black school buildings was the chief point of conflict in the deepening dispute between African Americans and white school officials and politicians. For African Americans, the loss of these invaluable community resources was too high a price to pay for integration.

However, the school board exhibited a total disregard for the interests or rights of black citizens. According to the Observer, “Harris’ [school board chairman David Harris] letter expressed sympathy for the Negro complaints, but said the board was complying with the law, and Harris defended the board’s desegregation plans.” In the eyes of Harris, and seemingly the rest of the school board, African Americans had asked for integration in the first place, so they would have no choice but to accept its implementation on white terms. African Americans, who valued education as a means of social and economic empowerment and rightfully felt that they had a constitutional right to integrated school facilities, did not agree.118

On May 22, 1966, black leaders including Dr. Reginald Hawkins, Reverend Robert Swann, and Reverend Arthur White called a meeting of 150 African Americans at Amay James Presbyterian Church, located about five miles west of downtown. At the meeting, committee members lambasted the school board for its duplicitous response to the committee’s petition. Committee members said, “We are not at all satisfied with the conclusions of the board chairman…and we regret this opinion of his as stated in his

letter is presumed to be the opinion of the entire board.” Linking education to politics, they called for voters to only support candidates supportive of the black community’s interests in the upcoming democratic primaries on Saturday, May 28. Committee members then created a five-point plan of action that included a federal investigation of school board plans and actions, financial support for black teachers “who may have suffered economic or professional reprisals in the pursuit of economic justice,” and the formation of a committee of black leaders to testify before the federal government.119

The plan of action, read by Rev. Robert Shirley, highlighted the continued centrality of black educators in the movement. In the wake of the entry of the North Carolina’s Teachers Association into the Swann case in 1965, black community leaders sought to protect educators from reprisals from white school officials.120 As the teachers’ equalization campaigns beginning in the 1940s had made painfully clear, educators who challenged economic inequalities in the system could realistically expect termination.121 The committee’s calls for financial assistance to teachers who had challenged economic and racial discrimination illustrate the centrality of economic issues in every aspect of the civil rights movement, both locally and nationally. Black educators historically played important roles as community leaders, and Rev. Shirley and the other committee leaders, likely recognized that black educators would need financial support to continue in this capacity as activists.

119 Ibid.
120 "Ibid.
Less than a month later, members of the Ad Hoc Committee at Northwest Junior High School met to plan their attack against the desegregation plan released the previous month. Once again religious leaders including Rev. Shirley, Rev. Hawkins, and Rev. Elo L. Henderson issued a scathing critique of what they saw as the corrupt alliances between school official, businessmen, and political leaders. Voicing publicly what was common opinion in the black community, and referring to political leaders and President Johnson’s War on Poverty programs, Hawkins said, “Urban renewal means Negro removal…the only new war needed in Charlotte is a war on the Uncle Toms, both white and black.”

Urban renewal plans targeted Charlotte’s black communities beginning as early as the late 1930s, and reaching its climax of destruction in the late 1960s. The lure of New Deal dollars motivated Charlotte politicians and real estate developers to actively pursue urban planning, and in 1944, the city established the first Charlotte Planning Commission. As Thomas Hanchett argues, “From 1949 to 1974 the Federal Urban Renewal Administration offered a cash bonanza that encouraged cities to undertake redevelopment on an unheard-of scale…City officials loved the concept, since local government put up less than a third of the cash.” However, before long the interests of city developers and politicians took precedence over the interests of the urban poor. “The definition of the slums to be demolished also loosened…Urban renewal became a powerful tool to clear land and convert it to whatever local politicians deemed a ‘better use.’” The commission quickly adopted federal zoning regulations of the Federal

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Housing Administration which increased residential segregation by applying a racially-coded mapping system. Real estate agents and politicians worked together to ensure that any new public housing developments were built in predominantly African American neighborhoods, thus encouraging a greater divide between the city’s white and non-white citizens.123

By the 1960s, the pace of urban renewal in Charlotte increased dramatically, taking a devastating toll on historically black neighborhoods. Between 1960 and 1967, city officials targeted Brooklyn, a large black business and residential district in Second Ward, demolishing huge swaths of the downtown neighborhood. Charlotte Redevelopment Authority officials blatantly disregarded the stated purpose of urban renewal. “Not a single new housing unit went up to replace the 1,480 structures that fell to the bulldozer. Urban renewal demolition displaced 1,007 Brooklyn families. Urban renewal displaced 26 Brooklyn businesses. Many never reopened.”124 In their place, city planners eagerly built new city government buildings, business offices, and eventually convention centers. Brumit Delaine, the son of Rev. Joseph A. DeLaine who led the suit in Briggs v. Elliot, one of the five cases which constituted Brown, recalled the devastating impact urban renewal had on African Americans in Charlotte. “Urban renewal cleared out a lot of black neighborhoods. It caused a heavier concentration of poor blacks in the

123 Hanchett, Sorting Out the New South City, 245-248 and 249.
124 Ibid, 250.

Nearly every black neighborhood in the city suffered a similar fate in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In order to make way for Independence Boulevard, a major city thoroughfare, planners bulldozed Elizabeth neighborhood and other black communities in the inner-city. City officials also razed First Ward in the early 1960s. Perhaps the most egregious example of “negro removal” was the redevelopment of downtown near Trade Street. In the early 1970s the Redevelopment Authority tore down many black businesses to make way for the Charlotte Convention Center, the Radisson Hotel and corporate banking headquarters.
neighborhoods that they were forced into.” He described the beginnings of urban redevelopment plans in the New Deal era, “In the 30s and the 40s, you had black neighborhoods, but very often they were integrated already. Even the ones that were not integrated racially had a good socioeconomic mix. But when they came with urban renewal you started getting all of the poor people pushed into the same area.”

Black families, abruptly tossed out onto the streets, had few options for quality affordable housing in the city, and subsequently moved into increasingly concentrated, impoverished neighborhoods to the North and West of downtown.

Many Charlotteans, including Hawkins, linked economic discrimination to the perpetuation of racially segregated schools. Rev. Paul Leonard, a white Presbyterian minister active in the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s, argued that wealthy white politicians, business leaders, and school officials conspired to restrict African Americans’ access to quality education and other city services. “The political means for achieving this goal of economic and racial segregation has been based upon an insidious and deceiving political-economic relationship between silk-stocking whites and black “leaders.” Leonard continued, “It is through this alliance of unequals that they black community has been manipulated and used by white leaders for their own ends.”

Leonard, like Hawkins, asserted that white city father’s had used funds for federal anti-poverty programs to further suppress black activism and racial reform. “One of the major vehicles for preserving and strengthening the unequal white-black alliance in recent years has been the federal anti-poverty and model cities programs.” He argued, “It has been the

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federal monies that have provided the pay-off and the patronage and allowed white leaders to buy off any genuine black leadership.” Leonard, like many fellow activists, pressed for social reforms which redistributed economic, political, and social power amongst all its citizens. Leonard spoke to the beliefs of many local activists when he placed educational activism within the broader context of economic and social reform movements at the local and national level.

Fred Robbins, a First Ward resident also present at the June 20 meeting, spoke to the concerns of many black Charlotteans as he described the pattern of under-funding of black schools. “We are expected to have 600 new families in our area by September. We were told that $75,000 allocated for badly needed expansion at First ward (school) would be used for construction of five other schools, and now we hear that the money will go to buy 50 mobile classrooms.” As these comments illustrate, average citizens who faced the consequences of the school system’s racially discriminatory policies on a daily basis had a very clear understanding of the ways in which the school board undermined black education. Black activists at the meeting also highlighted the negative impact desegregation had on black educators. Rev. Swann, spoke on the behalf of black principals. “Discriminatory practices are being used in Charlotte and throughout North Carolina to replace Negro principals with white ones.”

Leaders at both these meetings had begun to make more explicit links between the actions of the white power structure—political, business and school leaders—and the perpetuation of racially-segregated school facilities, which would become an even more prominent part of black activists’ critiques in the coming years. As the comments of Rev. Henderson, Swann, and Hawkins illustrate, black activists had a clear-eyed understanding of the ways in which white elites used the public school system as a mechanism to reinforce economic inequality and the status quo.

By the summer of 1969, a new tone had swept through the national civil rights movement, and Charlotte proved no exception. While many of the protest movements of the early to mid-1960s had been led and supported by middle-class black Charlotteans, the movements of the late 1960s attracted a broader coalition of supporters featuring larger numbers of youths and working-class African Americans. In this way, the movement in Charlotte reflected broader trends in the civil rights movement at the national level with the increasing prominence of the Black Panther Party, Black Power, and the numerous student led movements of the New Left.

Although Black Power stepped out onto the national scene in 1966, it drew from deep traditions of self-reliance, self-defense, and racial autonomy in the black community. In his article “What We Want” Stokely Carmichael outlined the theoretical basis and practical applications of Black Power in the movement. Carmichael carefully laid out the growing frustrations of African Americans with their continued mistreatment at the hands of whites, the lack of tangible progress in the fight for racial equality, and the practice of non-violence. Carmichael argues that the black freedom movement must
develop a critique and plan of action which spoke directly to the dire economic circumstances of African Americans. “Ultimately, the economic foundations of this country must be shared if black people are to control their lives…For a century, this nation has been like an octopus of exploitation, its tentacles stretching from Mississippi and Harlem to southern Africa, and Vietnam.” Highlighting white elite’s stranglehold on international resources, he continued, “A powerful few have been maintained and enriched at the expense of the poor and voiceless colored masses.” He asserted that without a fundamental redistribution of economic and political capital, the masses of African Americans would remain on the margins of society, unable to gain access to the fruits of this nation.

Carmichael’s arguments in favor of Black Power echo many of the themes of black Charlotteans’ critiques of racially discriminatory desegregation plans which came at the expense of black educational traditions. Carmichael decried the emphasis placed on integration in many mainstream civil rights movements and organizations. “As a goal, it has been based on complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, blacks must move into a white neighborhood or send their children to a white school.” He noted the damaging impact this had on views of race in mainstream society. “This reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that ‘white’ is automatically better and ‘black’ is by definition inferior.” Carmichael, much like local activists in Charlotte, argued that African Americans needed greater control over the education reform process, as well as the schools themselves. Increasingly, during the late

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129 Carmichael, “What we Want.”
1960s, African Americans in Charlotte mobilized in huge numbers in opposition to integration plans which took a heavy toll on the black community.

Rev. George J. Leake, a minister at Little Rock A.M.E. Zion Church in downtown Charlotte and Director of the Opportunity Industrialization Center, stepped publicly into the arena of civil rights activism in Charlotte when he spoke at a meeting of the Committee on Community Relations. On April 6, 1968, just two days after Martin Luther King’s assassination in Memphis, Leake called on white business leaders to fulfill their duty to black Charlotteans, and invited them to attend a service for Dr. King at St. Paul Baptist Church. Community leaders responded to his invitation, if not his calls for racial reform, and a number of prominent white politicians and business men, including Mayor Stanford Brookshire and County Commission Chairman Jim Martin, attended the service.

Leake’s specific targeting of the business community highlights a new development in the methodology of educational activism in Charlotte. Leake recognized the enormous power held by white business owners and the strong ties between the business community, politicians, and school officials in Charlotte. In these appeals, Leake hoped to pressure business leaders to, in turn, pressure political leaders and school officials to create and implement fairer models of educational change. He understood that in Charlotte, a city consumed by its quest for economic power and development, any social reform movement would have to enlist the aid of the business community if it hoped to succeed. Indeed, alliances built across racial and class lines would prove

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130 Smith, *Boom for Whom?*, 2.
crucial in the quest for peacefully, racially integrated, academically fulfilling school communities over the next five years.

In the midst of these struggles between local black educational activists and white city leaders, and the national chaos that followed Dr. King’s assassination, the nation’s highest court issued its ruling on one of the most significant cases in desegregation law: *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*. On May 27, 1968, the court ruled that so-called freedom of choice plans which did not result in measurable progress in integration were unconstitutional. Many southern school districts had long employed “freedom of choice” plans which purportedly allowed students to transfer to a school other than their assignment. School boards frequently argued that such plans gave African American students the chance to attend predominantly white schools, if they so chose. In practice however, school boards rarely approved such transfer requests, and relied on complicated administrative guidelines and bureaucratic structures to discourage black parents from requesting transfers in the first place. This ruling set off a landslide of new desegregation suits and laid the groundwork for future judicial rulings which used extensive busing to integrate schools.

Indeed, the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Green* encouraged Julius Chambers and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to reinitiate their suit against the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board. After the Fourth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruled against the plaintiffs in July 1965, the case had appeared dead. However, the ruling in *Green* brought *Swann* back to life in 1968. On April 23, 1969, Judge James McMillan issued his long-awaited

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132 Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 128-130.
ruling in the case of Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education. Nearly five years after a group of more than 130 black parents first petitioned the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board to eliminate racially segregated schools in 1964 McMillan ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered the school board to desegregate every school in the public school system.

Still, McMillan’s ruling could not destroy a mechanism of racially segregated schools fine tuned over 100 years overnight. In the months leading up to McMillan’s decision, the overwhelming majority of black students still attended racially segregated schools. Indeed, even after the Supreme Court ruled in Green v. New Kent County, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board continued to support a dual school system.\textsuperscript{133} According to historian Davidson Douglas, “In 1969, twenty-five of the thirty-one newly constructed elementary schools had a student population at least 98 percent single race; eight of the thirteen new junior high schools were at least 98 percent single race; and four of the five new senior high schools were at least 91 percent single race.”\textsuperscript{134} During the 1968-1969 school year, Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s senior high schools remained starkly divided in white and black. At the historically black West Charlotte High School, all 1569 students were African American and African Americans comprised nearly ninety-eight percent of the professional staff. Traditionally white high schools like Myers Park, Independence, and East Mecklenburg ranged between eighty-five and ninety-five percent

\textsuperscript{133} Green v New Kent County.
\textsuperscript{134} Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 138.
white. By the definitions applied by John Finger, University of Rhode Island educational scholar and court-appointed desegregation expert in the *Swann* case, “a school is considered segregated if it enrolls less than 10% Negro or white pupils.” By almost any measure, the rulings of local, state, or federal courts had a very limited impact on the actual racial makeup of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools through 1969. Thus Judge McMillan’s ruling threatened to change the relationship between race and public education in Charlotte for the first time.

In the wake of the court’s ruling, the school board released a new desegregation plan in July 1969 which galvanized the black community, stimulating new heights of activism among masses of black Charlotteans. In theory the school board’s plan complied with Judge McMillan’s orders to provide for partial integration of the student body and the complete integration of faculty, by the fall of 1970. In reality, their plan was nothing short of a spiteful rejection of the black community’s traditions. The plan proposed the closure of seven historically black schools, including Second Ward High School. Second Ward High School, founded in 1923, was one of the first three high schools built in Charlotte. Until the city built West Charlotte High School in 1938, Second Ward was the only black high school in the city. The board announced that it would reassign the black students who had formerly attended these seven schools to several different white schools on the city’s outskirts. The plan also called for the

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135 “Comparison of Pupils and Professional Staffing By Race” March 6, 1965 and 1968-69, Box 7, Folder 7, Chambers Papers. Second Ward High School, the system’s oldest historically black high school had only three white students out of a total enrollment of 1,139. Likewise, there were just three white professional staff members of the total faculty of sixty.

136 Dr. Jack Larsen, Dr. John Finger, Jr., Dr. Robert Passy “The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System: Analysis and Recommendations,” Box 6, Folder 19, Chambers Papers, UNCC.
reassignment of 1,200 students from overcrowded black schools to white schools, but no reassignment of white students to historically black schools. Moreover, it made no promises about the future employment of African American educators. “Principals of the closed schools will be reassigned as principals at other schools where positions are open.” The school board openly justified placing the burden on black students because such plans had been “acceptable” in other cities like Buffalo and Syracuse. This open admission of their intention to place the burden on the black community and their blatant disregard for their traditions set the stage for the massive mobilization of the African American community against the school board’s actions.

Flooding a school board meeting on July 31, 1969, black community members protested the board’s most recent plan and its historically discriminatory treatment of black citizens. The Charlotte News reported, “Board action began after a series of speakers harangued board members for ‘broken promises to the black community’ for ‘placing the burden of desegregation on blacks.’” Leake called for the school board to keep open three of the seven black schools marked for closure. Throughout August, Leake continued to insist on the creation of a compromise plan. Other black community members present at the meeting called on the school board to keep its promise to rebuild Second Ward High School. The board members refused to commit to build the new Metropolitan High School, saying only that they would “do whatever is legally possible to place $2 million in escrow to be used to make Metropolitan a specialty school

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137 “Shut 7 Schools: 4,200 Negroes Would Transfer,” Charlotte News, July 23, 1969. Among the schools closed were Irwin Avenue Junior High, Alexander Street Elementary, Bethune Elementary, Fairview Elementary, Zeb Vance Elementary, and Isabella Wyche Elementary. “A Total of some 3,000 children attended these schools.”
sometime in the future.” The board, however, never made good on its promise to build Metropolitan High.

Rev. Leake delivered a powerful speech at the meeting describing the mood among black Charlotteans in the wake of the board’s plan. According to the newspaper, “Leake said that after the board announced its proposed plan, ‘righteous indignation and anger were the immediate reaction. Violent moods and words were the order of the day’ in the black community.” Indeed, at least in the eyes of the white community, the rhetoric of black activism that summer took an increasingly aggressive tone. Although Leake’s words likely invoked white fears of black violence and urban riots black unrest after King’s assassination, no actual violence occurred in connection with black Charlotteans’ educational activism that summer. The next day the Charlotte News printed a photo of at least six Black Panther Party members at the school board meeting, which likely fed into white’s stereotypes of the organization. Whether Leake, known for his fiery oratorical skills and charismatic leadership style, specifically played to white fears with his speech and the image of Black Panthers lining the wall at the meeting, the models of black activism and the image of leadership had certainly changed in Charlotte. Whereas the Westside Parents Council’s boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High in 1961 had relied upon a mostly middle-class black leadership cadre and the “politics of

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138 “School Board Going Ahead With New Integration Plan,” Charlotte News, 14A.
139 Ibid.
140 White fears of black riots were likely also fueled by the memories of urban rebellions in Watts and Detroit from 1965-1968. See C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).
respectability,” the movements of the late 1960s heartily embraced working-class activists and a new mix of tactics and symbols.

After listening to a number of community members express their frustrations with the school board, Rev. Coleman W. Kerry Jr., the board’s only black member, submitted a motion to withdraw the board plan. School board members moved swiftly to crush the motion, with six of the nine members voting against Kerry’s proposal. With this defeat, the board majority and Superintendent William Self took control of the meeting and blanketed the crowd with a number of vague and non-committal statements about future desegregation plans. Enraged by the board’s obtuseness, Leake led the contingent of
black community members and Black Panthers out of the meeting. A new approach would be needed.

Leake drew on this working class constituency to develop a multifaceted attack on the school board based on his awareness of the prescient economic needs of the majority of black Charlotteans, and the central role economic interests played in city operations. One hot summer morning marchers took to the streets of downtown Charlotte to voice their discontent. On Thursday July 31, a group of about 115 African Americans began picketing outside of Belk’s department store in the heart of downtown. Picketers handed out pamphlets to people passing by which outlined their resistance to the school board’s desegregation plan. These leaflets read, “The fact that the School Board has taken it upon itself to close seven black schools and to bus black children one-way is the fault of Charlotte’s white leaders and business people.” It continued, “If our schools and communities aren’t good enough for their children, then our money is too good for their businesses.”¹⁴¹ The next morning, Rev. Leake announced that the black community’s boycott of downtown would continue until the school board withdrew its recent desegregation plan, and scrapped its plans to close Second Ward High School. Leake warned that if the school board did not comply with the demands of the black community they would “resort to massive resistance and civil disobedience.” Leake’s press conference also provided hints of the future direction of the movement, when he said that he would “ask the help” of downtown business owners.

¹⁴¹ “Belk’s Store Picketed-First Evidence of Negro Boycott,” Charlotte Observer, August 1, 1969, p. 9A.
Leake’s refusal to elaborate on this point or to outline specific plans for the protest points once again to his savvy use of the media to highlight black opposition, and his propensity for a dramatic flair in his leadership style. The *Charlotte Observer* reported that Leake planned to ask store owners to sign a petition in support of black Charlotteans’ opposition to the board’s plan. Despite the fact that Leake blamed the business community for the maintenance of segregated schools, he also looked to them as a potential source of support. In essence, Leake appealed to the vanities of business leaders by telling them that only *they* had the power to exert broad influence over the entire city. He encouraged them to exercise this power to bring racial and educational reform to the city. He also hoped to appeal to their desire for a positive image in the eyes of the state, nation, and even the rest of the world. Dodging reporters’ questions about

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142 *We’re Stopping the Shopping*, in Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 145.
the future direction of the protest, Leake said, “…I can assure you, it will be dramatic, causing the focus of the world to be on Charlotte.” Much as Reginald Hawkins had invoked the threat of exposing the United States domestic racial injustice to the world stage in the depths of a Cold War propaganda battle, Leake took advantage of city leaders’ desires to hide their civil rights dirty laundry from the rest of the world. Both Leake and Hawkins understood that a public confrontation over racial justice would severely damage U.S. credibility in the international fight against communism. And Charlotte did not want to be the center of the storm.

In his press conference that morning, Leake also announced plans for the march to Second Ward High School the following day. On August 2, 1969, 1200 marchers gathered at the U.S. Post Office in downtown Charlotte in the stifling heat and humidity of a late summer morning in North Carolina. As the numbers of protestors swelled, so too did the anticipation and energy as they prepared for their one-and-a-half-mile protest march from West Trade Street to Second Ward High School. Black marchers, joined by about fifty whites, began a slow procession through downtown, clapping, cheering, and calling out to the crowds that gathered along the route. Carrying signs that read, “Blacks! Help save your schools,” “Justice is gone,” and “Justice is dead in this stinking All-American city,” they broke out in choruses of what had become the iconic protest songs of the civil rights movement, “We Shall Overcome.” Black youths dressed in the iconic uniform of the Black Panther Party flanked the marchers as the made their way

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143 “Blacks Boost Pickets, Map Resistance,” *Charlotte Observer*, August 2, 1969, p. 6C.
144 Ibid.
through downtown. After two hours, the marchers finally reached their destination and symbolic center of their protest, Second Ward High School.145

Figure 7. Second Ward High School, Charlotte, 1969.146

Standing on the front steps of the building, Leake delivered a passionate condemnation of the school board’s plans to close Second Ward High School. Leake spoke for many black Charlotteans when he blasted the school board for its creation of racially discriminatory desegregation plans which placed the heaviest burdens of change on African Americans. The energy of the afternoon reached a near fever pitch as Leake and other speakers promised to fight the school board and reassert the rights of the black community. Perhaps inspired by Leake’s fiery call to action, or exhausted by the heat, at least three women in that crowd fainted during his twenty-minute speech. Ending his

146 Charlotte Observer.
speech with a rhetorical flourish and call to action, Leake implored the people to “Go out from here and tell everybody that if they think that we have been defeated they are wrong as they can be because we have just begun to fight.” Moments later Leake stepped down from the steps of Second Ward back into the crowd and collapsed to the ground. Quickly, police officers on the scene hurried to revive him, as Leake’s son nearly fainted himself in tears. Within moments however, Leake revived from his exhaustion and heat-induced collapse, and law enforcement officers escorted him home in a police car to recuperate. At last the tumultuous march came to a close as protestors dispersed from the abandoned school yard. But the high emotions and heavy attendance of the march had made one thing painfully clear to the city of Charlotte: African Americans would fight for their community schools.

Pushing the heady emotions and dramatic images of Black Power aside, this march also revealed the complexities and realpolitik character of the black community’s protest against the school board. The march and the marchers themselves defied the easy stereotypes so commonly applied to Black Power and protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s: angry, irrational, violent, and racially exclusionary. The quest for educational reform and social equality in Charlotte transcended artificial boundaries of race, sex, class, and age, and protestors drew upon a broad coalition of supporters and tactics in their quest for dignity and equality in the public schools.

The march also emphasized the growing influence of the Black Panther Party in black freedom movements nationally, and in North Carolina particularly. Groups of Panthers, armed with walkie talkies, guided the marchers as they made their way up Trade Street. Benjamin Chavis’s role as demonstration coordinator illustrated the increasingly central role young black activists played in the civil rights movement in Charlotte. A student at University of North Carolina at Charlotte at the time, Chavis had a long history of educational activism and brought his considerable organizing talents to bear at the Second Ward march. Chavis, who later attracted international attention as one of the “Wilmington Ten” wrongfully imprisoned for their efforts to integrate the Wilmington Public Schools in 1971, also defied stereotypes of Black Power activism.148 In a theme emphasized by several of the afternoon’s speakers, Chavis called for interracial cooperation in the movement. “Let me tell you something. Black folks and those white folks who care are going to get together and solve the problem.” Chavis warned the school board that the black community would not accept half-measures or hollow statements of their commitment to racial equality designed to appease black Charlotteans. “If the school board continues to apply this racist policy, we are going to have to solve it by action means.”149 Although the confrontation between the protestors and the school board never escalated to the physical level that summer, Chavis’ statements illustrated the rising tensions between the black community and white city and school officials. Hostilities had simmered beneath the surface for years, occasionally

bubbling over with the downtown sit-ins and the boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High, but the threatened closure of Second Ward High School had clearly brought the conflict to a new level.

White Charlotteans also featured prominently in the march. Members of the white religious community openly condemned the actions of the school board and implored city officials to pay heed to the black community’s demands. Rev. Paul Leonard called on city officials to fulfill their duties to protect the rights of all the city’s citizens. “We hope that the leaders of this community—the Mayor’s Committee on Human Relations, the education committee of the Chamber of Commerce…will get off their seat and get on their feet. How long will it take them to hear?150 Leonard understood the deep roots of black discontent and sensed that frustration in the African American community had reached a dangerous level. Many white community members, including teenagers and suburban housewives, expressed their support for the black community’s protests, echoing the complaints of African Americans that the school board’s plans placed the burden of change too heavily on the shoulders of black students. “‘Two Myers Park mothers said simply, ‘We support their stand…One-way busing just won’t work.’ Another carried a sign reading ‘Two-way or no-way.’” The participation of white women from Myers Park, historically the city’s wealthiest neighborhood and home to many of the city’s business and political leaders, illustrates the broadening base of support for racially egalitarian models of school reform. It is quite likely that many of these women were married to the political, business, and educational leaders that the

150 Ibid.
marchers were protesting against. These signs and comments only served to reinforce African Americans’ critique of desegregation plans which systematically shut down black schools, laid off black educators, and frequently reassigned black students schools outside of their communities. The massive crowds which flooded onto the grounds of Second Ward High that afternoon sent the school board and city leaders a clear message: black Charlotteans would not sit back and passively accept integration plans which decimated their educational traditions.

**Figure 8. Marchers on Trade Street, Charlotte, 1969.**

Additionally, the march illustrated the networks between civil rights and labor movements and the increasingly economic focus of black educational activism in

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151 *Charlotte Observer.*
Charlotte. The march boasted strong support from local and national labor unions. At least 200 members of the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees (NAPFE) joined the marchers.\footnote{“Pickets Step Up Efforts,” \textit{Charlotte Observer}, August 2, 1969, p. 6C.} The NAPFE had strong roots in civil rights activism. It was founded in 1913 by a group of thirty-five black railway mail clerks in Tennessee to protect the employment opportunities of African Americans in the railway mail service.\footnote{National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees website, http://www.napfe.com/NAPFEhome.asp (accessed on April 9, 2008).} Local white labor activists, including James M. Pierce and Gene Gore, also supported African Americans in their opposition to the school board. Pierce played a prominent role in the sanitation workers strike in Charlotte which began when workers walked off the job on July 29. Strikers demanded pay raises, pay for overtime, and the right to representation. In the negotiations between city councilmen, worker representatives, and federal mediators, council members alluded to the impact of school desegregation protests on their handling of the sanitation strike. Councilman Belk said, “The council ‘weighed heavily the community’s mood of real concern about other serious issues.’” He continued, “This is a crucial time in our city’s history. We have sought advice from all segments of our community. We have welcomed the sound judgment of many citizens.”\footnote{\textit{Charlotte Observer}, August 5, 1969, p. 1A.} Ultimately, the presence of labor leader Jesse Epps, who had played a crucial role in the Memphis Sanitation Strike the year before, may have also pressured Charlotte city leaders to find a quick and peaceful solution to the conflict.\footnote{\textit{People’s Weekly World}, online newspaper, http://www.pww.org/article/articleview/3213/1/141 (accessed on April 9, 2008).}
In addition to speaking at the Second Ward High march, coordinating the boycott of downtown stores, and holding numerous press conferences, Rev. Leake helped to negotiate the successful conclusion of the strike in Charlotte. Leake drew on his local connections to encourage strikers to go back to work that Monday, if the council members agreed to their demands. In his speech at Second Ward High, Leake pointed to the example of the sanitation workers strike as a model of successful activism. Just as Leake had called on the business community to support African Americans in his address after Dr. King’s assassination, he again urged his fellow protestors to call on business owners to exert their considerable influence over school officials.

Two weeks after the school board first announced plans to shut down Second Ward High School and six other black schools, Judge McMillan weighed in on the plan in a hearing on August 5. Julius Chambers joined Rev. Leake and his supporters in their critique of the plan as racially discriminatory and placing an unfair burden on black parents and students. Leake, invited to the hearing by Judge McMillan, took the witness stand and condemned the plan which “says to us that the black community is to be punished for insisting on desegregation of the schools.” Speaking to a packed courtroom, Leake called for “two-way busing this year or nothing.” He asked for a revised desegregation plan, which bused white students to historically black schools and followed through on promises to rebuild Second Ward High School as Metropolitan High.156

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At the time of the Memphis strike, Epps served as the Assistant to the International President of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Epps encouraged Dr. King to lend his support to the strikers.

School Superintendent William Self defended the plan, arguing that it would provide black students the chance for a better educational experience. His statement cut to the heart of the conflict between black Charlotteans and white school officials. Self, and many other white school officials, assumed that black schools were inherently inferior to white schools because he did not recognize the social, political, and economic value of black schools historically. He evaluated the quality of a school based on its physical resources, ignoring the importance of black schools as spaces of liberation, empowerment, and community building. For Leake, like his many activist forebears, the destruction of seven schools represented a nearly fatal blow in the battle to protect black educational traditions in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools.

After listening to the heated exchanges between Leake, Chambers, and school board officials, Judge McMillan approved the school board’s plan, although he expressed some dissatisfaction with the one-way busing of black students. McMillan ordered the school board to create a new plan by November, which distributed the burden more equally. Throughout much of the desegregation process, McMillan articulated his desire for the school board to take the responsibility for the creation of desegregation plans, and resisted direct intervention by the court in the planning process.157

Four days later, in a surprise move, Rev. Leake announced that he had reached an agreement with school board chairman William Poe to create a compromise plan. Although rumors swirled about meetings between Poe and Leake in the days after the

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Leake argued that seven schools—Druid Hills, Tryon Hills, Oaklawn Avenue, Lincoln Heights, Bruns Avenue, University Park Elementary Schools and J.T. Williams Junior High School—were in perfectly fine condition and had the space to accept new white students.

court hearing, neither Poe nor his lawyer, William Waggoner would confirm that they
had reached an agreement, or even that Poe and Leake had met. Despite this, Leake
asserted that “they have been willing to accept-somewhat” his recommendations for a
revised integration plan which kept three black schools open.158

This controversy over an alleged compromise also revealed tensions within the
black community over tactics and leadership style. In the wake of Leake’s announcement
of a new desegregation plan, Reginald Hawkins stepped into the ring with a bold critique
of Rev. Leake. Hawkins attacked Leake for “compromising on the constitutional rights”
of black Charlotteans, and called his claims of a revised plan a “cruel hoax.” Upon
hearing the news of Hawkins’s statements, Leake called a press conference to publicly
deliver his retort. Leake argued that the majority of the black community wanted a
compromise plan, and that he acted only according to their wishes. “A person would
have to be a plain, dumb, stupid fool to believe this is not what the people want.” He
continued, “I’m not trying to please Dr. Hawkins. I’m not trying to please anyone. I’m
trying to do what the people want.”159 In this case, Leake attempted to frame himself as
the man of the people and Dr. Hawkins as an out-of touch and ideologically stiff
politician.

Dr. Hawkins had remained largely uninvolved in the protests over the closure of
Second Ward High School until his conflict with Rev. Leake. Aside from the obvious
personality clash between these two men, their debate reflected deeper tensions within
the black community over protest methodology and friction between working- and

159 “Leake: Compromise of Sorts on Schools,” Charlotte Observer, August 9, 1969, p. 12A.
middle-class groups. Leake’s leadership of the 1969 protest brought large groups of lower-class black Charlotteans into the mainstream of the civil rights movement in Charlotte which had previously been dominated by a small group of middle-class leaders. Still, class tensions do not entirely account for the war of words between Leake and Hawkins. After all, the two men had a fair amount in common as fellow religious leaders and embraced a fairly similar protest ideology. Indeed Hawkins’s argument in the boycott of Irwin Avenue Junior High, which centered around a rhetoric of respect for and inclusion of the African American community, mirrored Leake’s critique of the school board’s plan in 1969. Both men understood and advocated for the importance of black educational traditions, and refused to accept school reform plans which ignored the interests or voices of the black community.

Hawkins’s attack on Leake likely had less to do with Leake personally than it did with his methods. Hawkins had received a harsh lesson in the manipulative and spiteful nature of the white power structure--exemplified by the school board--when Mayor Brookshire outmaneuvered him with the creation of Committee on Community Relations in 1960. Understandably, he was quite wary of trusting the school board. Nothing in the history of the relationship between the black community and the school board indicated any willingness on the board’s part to treat African Americans with respect. Hawkins’s past experiences directly informed his analysis of current events in Charlotte, and his reactions to Rev. Leake’s leadership of the movement in 1969. Hawkins worried that a compromise deal between Leake and the school board would, in essence, give the school board the moral upper hand in the battle over school integration and undermine the black
community’s longer fight against desegregation plans which undermined their educational traditions. Moreover, Hawkins had more experience as a civil rights activist in Charlotte and may have resented Leake for his seemingly sudden rise to fame as the leader of this movement. A comparison between the two men must also recognize the differences in their constituencies. While the WPC attracted a largely middle-class and middle-aged African American constituency, the protests of the late 1960s drew much more heavily on a working-class and college-aged organizing base. Even as different segments of the black community became involved in the fight for educational reform in the 1960s and 1970s, black Charlotteans as a whole maintained their focus on the maintenance of black educational traditions.

A mass meeting held at West Charlotte High School on August 10, however, seemed to validate Leake’s claims of a mandate for leadership. At the meeting, Leake outlined the actions he and his fellow protestors had taken thus far in their fight against the school board plan. But he did not specifically mention his alleged meetings with board Chairman Poe, only asserting that he had always acted with the best interests of the people in mind. Referring to these controversial meetings with Poe, Leake said, “Conversation intensified on the telephone between interceding parties in the community seeking to present a change in the plan that would satisfy the black community.” Increasingly, in the days since Hawkins’s attack, Leake wanted greater involvement from the black community and encouraged average citizens to take more active roles in directing the movement. Leake called on the crowd of 800 people to elect a committee to handle their fight against the school board, and then invited audience members up on
stage to share their questions and concerns. Leake’s gestures of solidarity for the people apparently solidified his leadership status as one teenager called out to the crowd, “Is he (Leake) our man?” In response, the crowd cheered wildly as various other community members called for Leake to take formal control of the movement.\textsuperscript{160} This rally, much like the protest at the school board meeting and the march to Second Ward, highlighted the increasingly vocal role of the younger generation in the movement in Charlotte. At every juncture, young people not only participated but played vital, substantive roles in shaping the message and tactics of their protest.

Ultimately, the school board managed to slide through yet another clash with the black community over school desegregation unscathed. Second Ward High School never reopened, and the school board never followed through on its plans to build Metropolitan High School. When schools finally opened in September 1969, only 8,517 of the total 24,714 black students in the system in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools attended white schools. More than seventy-five percent of the schools remained racially identifiable.\textsuperscript{161} The numerous loop-holes within the school board plan allowed almost unlimited transfers for white students back to predominantly white schools.

Tensions built steadily in the schools in the fall of 1969 as the battles between the school board, the plaintiffs in Swann, and the court escalated. In December 1970, Judge McMillan ultimately relented to outside assistance and appointed desegregation expert John Finger to aid the school board in the creation of a new desegregation plan. By March, the school board began the process of appealing McMillan’s ruling, adding to

\textsuperscript{160} “800 Blacks Cheer On School Fight Leaders,” \textit{Charlotte Observer}, August 11, 1969, p. 1C.  
\textsuperscript{161} Douglas, \textit{Reading, Writing & Race}, 163.
growing confusion around the desegregation process and the climate of hysteria in the city. By the spring of 1970, at least fourteen historically black schools had been closed within the last four years, the black community had suffered two serious strategic losses with the Westside Parents Council and the 1969 integration plan, and black students faced an upcoming school year of enormous anxiety.

After more than fifteen years of delays, resistance, and outright conflict over the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown*, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools remained largely segregated. Aided by a lack of enforcement will from local, state, and national leaders, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board successfully evaded the ruling from the nation’s highest court. Black parents and community activists in Charlotte continued to fight for equitable models of school desegregation that both protected their educational traditions and challenged the political and economic stranglehold of white elites. Despite their ongoing struggle, when substantive integration of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools finally began in the fall of 1970, the all-white school board had pushed through an integration plan which ignored nearly every recommendation or complaint of the black community. It was only a matter of time until these verbal conflicts became physical.

Yet, despite these strategic losses, the continued conflicts between black Charlotteans and the school officials in the mid to late 1960s strengthened and shaped black educational activism in several important ways. First, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, despite the numerous problems with implementation and oversight, did give activists greater leverage to push local school officials to action. Additionally, rulings in favor of the plaintiffs in *Swann* exerted added pressure on the school board to end dual
school systems. Ultimately however, the most significant developments of this time period centered around changes within the black protest community itself. The protests in 1969 showed the first signs of broader alliances between white and black Charlotteans, rallying around the need for peaceful, inclusive, morally just school communities. Perhaps most significantly for the ultimate consequences of school desegregation in Charlotte, 1969 marked a notable increase in the role of black students in the movement in Charlotte. Students, more than any other group in the early 1970s, felt the impact of school desegregation plans, and took advantage of this unique situation to shape the direction of their protest.
CHAPTER 3

“You’re going to always have some people who are trying to knock you back, and you may get knocked down. Sometimes I tell people, I may have to lay there, I don’t have to wallow it. I don’t have to keep rolling in it, I may have to just lay there and get my thoughts. But then I rise up to my knees, and then rise on up to my feet, and stand. And then I take that step.”162

“I don’t know how to start this letter except to say something you know already. Trouble has come to our school. We’ve got to get our people back together. By my count we have 54 days left this year with much to do so we can’t waste time.”163

Independence High School Principal Sam Haywood wrote these words to the 2,200 members of the student body in the wake of student disturbances which rocked the school on March 7, 1973. The day had likely begun as any other; students shuffled sleepily from their buses into homeroom, as rumors of a wave of student unrest at four other Charlotte High Schools earlier in the week hung thick in the air.164 After three years of political maneuvering, educational disruption, and community-wide protest, the tensions surrounding school desegregation had finally boiled over into system-wide chaos.

In the brief ten-minute breaks between classes, groups of Independence students gathered on tiny “smoking patios.” These break areas had become microcosms of the larger school community, divided sharply along racial lines. On March 7, underlying distrust spiraled into open animosity when one white student stood up on the patio wall

162 Wilson interview.
163 “We’ve Got to Get Together,” Charlotte Observer, March 11, 1973, p. 2A.
164 Student disturbances occurred at South Mecklenburg High School, Garringer High School, Harding High School, and North Mecklenburg High School between March 1-6, 1973.
and screamed racial epithets at his black classmates during their sixth period break. On another day, the black students may have ignored this instigator, but not that afternoon. Within minutes, an all-out fist fight had broken out on the patio. Teachers and staff members interceded warily, fearful of being pulled into the melee. Desperate for order in an increasingly chaotic situation, school administrators turned to law enforcement officers for protection and guidance. The officers, armed with nightsticks, flooded onto campus, wading through crowds of confused and angry students. When Dexter Feaster, an African American student leader and stellar athlete, challenged one police man on his brazen use of force and violation of students’ rights, the officer rewarded his concern with due process with a swift beating to the head requiring sixteen stitches, an arrest for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, and a trip to jail courtesy the city’s prison bus. Feaster was not the only student to get a harsh lesson in racial justice that day. Police arrested fourteen more students for their involvement in the fight. At least nine black students suffered serious injuries. Independence High School closed for the remainder of the day.165

Between 1970 and 1974, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools underwent truly transformative changes. Judge McMillan’s ruling in Swann in 1969 forced the school board to finally face the task of desegregating the schools. However, rather than accepting McMillan’s ruling, the school board continued to seek ways to undermine the interests of the black community. As the protests surrounding the school board’s August 1969 plan reveal, African Americans refused to accept integration plans that came at the

165 Thompson interview and “Charlotte School Disorders” March 20, 1973, Box 4, Folder 2, Chambers Papers, UNCC.
expense of black schools, educators, and black students. Throughout much of the early 1970s, battles waged on between the school board, Judge McMillan, the plaintiffs in *Swann*, and other community groups. Ultimately, however, the Supreme Court issued the final judicial word on the case with its ruling in April, 1971, which upheld Judge McMillan’s decision two years earlier.\footnote{Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, 402 U.S. 1 (1971).}

At the grassroots level, students took central stage as the main actors in this conflict. The uproar surrounding McMillan’s decision and subsequent confusion drowned out the needs of the students who faced the consequences of hastily organized school desegregation plans every day in the classroom. Indeed, in the sixteen months between McMillan’s ruling and the first day of school in 1970, African American students waited anxiously for news of their new school assignments with little or no information from the school system. When the board finally released its desegregation plan in 1970, black Charlotteans responded angrily because the plan clearly discriminated against black students; forcing them to travel longer distances to schools than their wealthy, white counterparts. Ultimately, the actions of the school board did a great deal to foster resentment and anxiety amongst African American students that would only increase over the next four years.

Once in the schools, African American students faced truly chaotic scenes. Schools had received little support from the school system to prepare them for the impending changes, and this was reflected in the turbulent atmosphere on campuses. Throughout the 1970s, black high school students consistently called for the rights and
respect they deserved and which their white counterparts received without question. They complained of discriminatory treatment from teachers, the use of confederate symbols and mascots, and exclusion from extracurricular activities and student leadership positions. Building on the organizing experience they had gained in the 1969 protests over the proposed closures of Second Ward High School, African American students took bold steps to express their discontent to school administrators. Just as white school officials and city leaders continued their efforts to consolidate their control over black Charlotteans educational experience, black students continued the fight for representation, inclusion, and autonomy in the schools. However, the school board and system officials did little to address the students’ concerns. By ignoring the voices of students, school officials virtually guaranteed conflict in the schools. Several waves of serious student disturbances rocked high schools in 1971, 1972, and 1973, resulting in school closures, student injuries and arrests, and immeasurable loss in the students’ and the community’s confidence in their schools.
While protests during the early 1970s highlighted many of the same themes of earlier movements, students’ entrance into the battle brought a distinctly new dynamic to the debate. Black students’ experiences of discrimination in the schools illustrated in gritty detail the need for fairer models of integration. Even so, unlike their older counterparts, students had less fear of economic reprisals from the white power structure for their activism. With less to lose, black students embraced bolder protest tactics in their quest to have their voices heard. Although a number of teachers, school administrators, and community leaders played crucial roles in the desegregation process, during the early 1970s students acted as the front line in the battle to tear down the status quo of public education.

167 Student Unrest, in Lassiter, The Silent Majority, 190.
168 Cecelski, Along Freedom Road.
The leadership of school administrators and educators also shaped the course of school desegregation in this period. Principals and teachers who recognized the importance of creating inclusive school communities, which fulfilled students both academically and emotionally, ultimately had the greatest success in preventing student unrest. Principals H.L. Hawkins and Leroy Miller are well remembered by former students and colleagues for their ability to transform school culture with their emphasis on high behavioral and academic standards, and their efforts to give the African American community greater roles in their schools. Successful leaders understood that the needs and achievement of all students should be the central focus of the schools on a daily basis.

Beginning in 1973, the community as a whole began to take steps to improve the situation in the schools. In 1973, a number of different organizations came together to form the Citizens Advisory Group (CAG), a biracial group of twenty-five members who collectively recognized the need for a school integration plan that would bring peace back to the schools and the larger community. Throughout the 1973-1974 school year, the CAG worked closely with Judge McMillan to create a more equitable integration plan, which met the needs of the greatest number of students and community members.¹⁶⁹ The CAG commissioned several reports and position papers on interracial relations in the schools which highlighted the discriminatory treatment of African American students. Unlike the school board and other school officials who largely ignored the needs of black students, the CAG embraced the opportunity to create desegregation plans which not only

¹⁶⁹ Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 236.
put black and white students in the same schools, but improved the quality of education provided to all children.

Ultimately, individual high schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools experienced various degrees of success in achieving racial peace and high academic standards during the first years of integration. The schools which achieved the highest level of success—East Mecklenburg High School and Independence High School—had strong faculty leaders, involved students in the reform process, and struck the delicate balance between an authoritarian and permissive school culture. Similarly, at the city level, the inclusion of a wide range of community groups played a crucial role in the creation of an integration plan in 1974 that distributed the burden of change more equitably throughout the city of Charlotte.

The explosion of violence at Independence High School on March 7, 1973 illustrated the festering racial tensions which existed just below the surface at the system’s public schools throughout the early 1970s. Despite the record of fifteen years of black discontent with the educational status quo, school officials and the media frequently professed their astonishment at student unrest. Frye Gaillard, a *Charlotte Observer* staff writer who frequently reported on school desegregation in Charlotte, seemed caught off guard by the student disturbances in the spring of 1973. Gaillard cited scheduling details as one potential cause of the riot at Independence High School. “It has been a long school year; students are eager for a vacation; and racial fighting is one proven way to get classes called off.” Even Sam Haywood, Principal of Independence High School, would not publicly connect the recent disturbance with interracial tensions.
in the schools. Said Haywood in the wake of the March riots, “Maybe the holiday thing had something to do with it. I don’t believe that a real racial hatred started our trouble.”

These comments, whether examples of feigned or real ignorance, illustrated the white community’s consistent devaluing of black educational needs, and their refusal to take the complaints of local African American activists seriously.¹⁷⁰

Racial tensions rose even before the official start of system wide integration. African American students felt enormous anxiety and confusion in the seventeen months between Judge McMillan’s ruling in April 1969 and the fall of 1970. While the courts and the school board argued over the exact nature of the school system’s role in both creating and eliminating racially identifiable schools, African American students wondered how their lives would change as a result of the court’s ruling. Although parents, community members, journalists, and businessmen all experienced changes as a result of school desegregation, no group felt the impact of school desegregation more acutely than students. The NAACP’s Legal Defense and Education Fund focused on establishing strict racial ratios in the schools of seventy percent white to thirty percent black in schools, redrawing attendance zone lines, and forcing the school board to implement the court’s orders. Meanwhile, black students desperately awaited information about what all of this would mean for their daily lives.

In the sweltering heat and oppressive boredom of those summer months of 1970, African American students’ apprehension over the year ahead rose to a fever pitch.

Madelyn Wilson, a native Charlottean and rising senior at West Charlotte High School in 1970, remembered with great clarity the fear she and her fellow classmates felt as they awaited their school assignment notices. “We knew things were going on, we were aware of that. But I can remember that spring, a lot of unrest.” These uncertainties, she continued, sometimes manifested themselves in outbreaks of physical violence. “The police cars were out at the school, and somebody put some sugar in the police cars tank because they were starting to talk about us being bused out, and part of, the biggest part of the confusion was that they didn’t tell us any thing definite.” The lack of communication from school officials coupled with often contradictory information in the media fostered a sense of resentment among many black students before they even entered white schools that fall. “They would say we’re gonna bus you out, and then they’d say, you’re gonna be in school longer so you won’t have a summer, or you’ll have only a month off instead of three months off. You’ll have to come back to school early. And it was like, what are you gonna do, what are you gonna do?”

Throughout that spring and summer the school board, Judge McMillan, and the plaintiffs engaged in agonizing and constant debates over the direction of school integration. African American students had no choice but to wait for more information from the school system, but the seeds of frustration had already been planted.

In the fall of 1970, huge numbers of black and white students prepared themselves to attend integrated public schools in the nation’s fifth most segregated city. Very little in the lives of most students had prepared them for this experience. At East Mecklenburg

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171 Wilson interview.
172 Hanchett, Sorting Out the New South City, 262.
High School just over twenty-three percent of the student body was black in September, 1970 compared to eleven percent in the fall of 1968. Likewise, Myers Park and Independence High School reached twenty-one and nineteen percent black respectively. But the greatest change occurred at West Charlotte High School where African Americans made up forty-four percent of the student body, compared to 100 percent just two years earlier. Although schools like East Mecklenburg, Independence, Myers Park, and West Charlotte still deviated from the seventy percent white, thirty percent black ratio recommended by the courts, their student bodies certainly looked quite different in 1970 than they had several years earlier. If the courts and community leaders expended enormous energy crafting a detailed pupil assignment plan which combined the recommendations of the school board and court-appointed desegregation expert Dr. John Finger, individual schools still received precious little preparation for the impending avalanche of change. Just as students had been awaiting news of their school assignments, so had the schools themselves. High school administrators had little advance notice of the makeup of their impending class.

Teachers and administrators in the schools at this time recall the relative lack of preparation for school integration. Ron Thompson, a former teacher and Assistant Principal at Independence High School in the 1970s, spoke of the incredibly difficult task schools faced in attempting to plan for the truly revolutionary changes in the school’s physical, social, and academic structure. “The judge says, ‘Okay, you’ve got to integrate

schools, and here’s how you’re going to integrate schools, and you’ve got two months to
do it.” As Thompson pointedly noted, the organizational and administrative details took
precedence over cultural or social preparations out of sheer necessity. “There’s not much
you can do other than just get transportation. Get the feeder zone set up. Decide who’s
going to go where, and how you’re going to get them there. That’s all you’ve got time to
do. That was tough. It took several years to recuperate from that.”

Figure 10. Ron Thompson, Charlotte, 1973.  

In other cases, teachers took it upon themselves to organize training workshops in
preparation for integration. Lucille Ross, a teacher at Kennedy Junior High School in the
early 1970s, recalled her faculty’s efforts to increase racial awareness and cooperation
among staff members. “We were always having after school workshops. Trying to help

175 Thompson interview.
176 CMPL.
us better understand the black students that we were teaching.” Ross also remembered
the racial tensions that would occasionally flare up between black and white teachers
during these workshops, “I just specifically remember one instance…She was a white-
haired lady, and she was getting on up there in years. She was exasperated because some
of the blacks were talking about how they were treated, or how their ancestors were
treated during slavery days.” Tempers flared quickly, “And this white lady said, ‘Well,
you’re just crying over spilled milk.’ Boy it made that black teacher furious and I
thought they were going to fight.” Just as large numbers of black and white students
came together in the classroom for the first time, September also marked the first time
large numbers black and white teachers had taught together in Charlotte. As the
experiences of Ron Thompson and Lucille Ross illustrate, students entering integrated
schools in the fall of 1970 faced a truly chaotic scene. School administrators scrambled
to finalize academic schedules, coordinate transportation, and fill teaching positions.
Meanwhile, black and white faculty members faced the onerous tasks of building
professional relationships with their new peers and providing students with positive
examples of interracial cooperation.

Black students entering predominantly and historically white schools faced
serious cultural, social, physical, and educational challenges. Foremost, the African
American community, and students specifically, felt resentful of school integration plans
that forced black students to take on a heavier load of change during integration. In the
aftermath of Judge McMillan’s ruling, middle- and upper-class whites mobilized around

177 Lucille Ross, interview with author, Charlotte, NC, October 6, 2007. [Hereafter cited as Ross interview.]
the rhetoric of color-blind meritocracy to oppose the assignment of white students to historically black schools. “From the perspective of the placid and prosperous suburbs, it seemed only reasonable that the black families asking for more desegregation should assume the burdens of any transition.”178 In the 1970s, black students took the lead in the battle against school desegregation plans which forced the black community to make much greater personal sacrifices than white Charlotteans. Years of conflict surrounding integration and the damages inflicted to black education in the form of closed schools and fired teachers took their toll on black students emotionally. Madelyn Wilson, a junior at West Charlotte High School in the 1969-1970 school year, was reassigned to Garringer High School for her senior year in 1970. She recalled the isolation she and many of her African American classmates felt. “I was taught to adjust, to take it in stride, but to be honest with you I felt angry, I felt cheated; I did not feel a part of Garringer when I first got there, even the whole year as a matter of fact.”179 As Wilson’s words suggest, it was incredibly difficult for many black students to find their place in schools with integration plans which devalued the humanity of black students and disregarded their educational needs.

Despite the enormous obstacles they faced, black students played truly central roles in the process of reform and reconciliation. However, many historical accounts of school desegregation in Charlotte have glossed over the contributions made by black students. They had the most intimate understanding of the issues really at stake in the

179 Wilson interview.
schools, and used their unique position to articulate the need for educational and racial reform in the schools quite forcefully. In a letter to Julius Chambers, students expressed serious discontent with their treatment in the schools. “Throughout the years, many injustices have occurred on school campuses to Black students. They have been expelled and suspended from schools. They have been arrested when they expressed their dissatisfaction with the injustices done to them.”\textsuperscript{180} Black students persevered in their pursuit of educational equity and cooperation. Ultimately, the school board’s disregard of black student’s grievances contributed heavily to the outbreak of physical violence in the schools. During the 1971-1972 school year, the public schools had an average of more than four bomb threats each week, and school officials suspended more than 400 students in the wake of student fights at Myers Park, South Mecklenburg, and Olympic High School in late October.\textsuperscript{181}

Black students consistently spoke out against unfair treatment from white staff members and their fellow students. In a statement from the black students of the system’s high schools, Operation C-U-R-E, and the Charlotte Chapter of the Youth Organization for Black Unity (YOBU), students outlined their general discontent with their treatment in the public schools. “We generally recognize the mistreatment of Black students--as an extension of this system’s mistreatment of Black people in general. We also recognize that something should be done to correct the injustices done to Black students.” In addition to outlining their complaints, these students explicitly called their

\textsuperscript{180} Letter to Julius Chambers from Operation C-U-R-E, November 11, 1972, Box 3, Folder 4, Chambers Papers, UNCC.

\textsuperscript{181} Douglas, \textit{Reading, Writing & Race}, 229.
fellow students to action to end racial discrimination. “Unless we as Black people more to remove the chains of oppression and injustice from ourselves, we will forever remain an oppressed people; we will forever remain the victims of injustice.”182 This language, with its themes of racial pride and self-help, illustrates a very real sense of personal commitment and power within this new generation of activists. Although these students fought for many of the same issues as their predecessors in the movement--respect for black identity and educational values, inclusion in the reform process--their methods shifted to include more direct, physical confrontations with white school officials and city leaders.

In addition to racial tensions, economic divisions plagued the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools during the first years of integration. Before 1965, four separate school systems existed in the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County: the African American county system, the African American city system, the white county schools, and the white city schools. Because public school funding came from property taxes, the city schools, with their concentration of wealthy corporations and expensive homes, had more funding. The relative lack of economic development in the rural county meant that county schools, both white and black, had considerably fewer resources. The city and county schools merged in 1965, bringing students from diverse economic backgrounds together. Yet, the public schools remained divided along racial lines. Students from such diverse economic and racial backgrounds only came together in the classroom for the first time in 1970. As Ron Thompson described it, “It was a very turbulent time. Here

182 Letter to Julius Chambers from Operation C-U-R-E.
they are, coming from two different worlds. One coming from a rural area and you have your rural African Americans, your rural white child. And then you have the inner-city. The two just did not…they were two different cultures.”¹⁸³ Not surprisingly, these fundamental differences in social and cultural backgrounds and experiences proved difficult obstacles for students to overcome on the road to interracial cooperation.

The school board’s integration plans also revealed a distinct bias against lower income white communities. In August 1971, a group of white parents from northeast and west Charlotte complained to Judge McMillan that the school board’s integration plans discriminated against students from their neighborhoods. The plans required lower class white students to attend schools outside of their communities and travel long distances than their wealthier counterparts. Judge McMillan acknowledged this problem, “It is apparent that the [board] plan puts increased burdens of transportation upon black children and upon children in certain low- and middle-income white communities.” Despite this, McMillan concluded that it was outside of the authority of the court to address economic discrimination.¹⁸⁴ The economic discrimination in the school board’s plans reflected the concentration of economic, social, and political power in the hands of wealthy whites living in exclusive neighborhoods, like Myers Park and Eastover, in southeast Charlotte. White elites maintained their control over the city’s urban development and the allocation of public resources through an ultra-powerful alliance of

¹⁸³ Thompson interview.
¹⁸⁴ McMillan quoted in Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 221.
politicians and business owners. The course of school integration in the early 1970s reflected the racial and socioeconomic hierarchy that favored wealthy whites.

Student discontent and racial tensions manifested themselves most dramatically in clashes over discipline and authority in the schools. Because high school principals exercised almost total control over the daily functioning of their schools, the severity of this problem of student discipline certainly varied from school to school. However, black students from nearly every high school frequently complained of discrepancies between the treatment of white and black students, and unfair treatment by law enforcement authorities. The black students of Operation C-U-R-E spoke directly to these concerns saying, “By February of last school year [1972], 2,500 students had been suspended and/or expelled. Of these, 2,400 were Black.” They continued, “When school disturbances broke out, Black students were severely beaten, then charged with assault, resisting arrest, trespassing, and so forth.” In the flare ups of fighting between white and black students, the actions of administrators and police officers came under hyper-scrutiny from students, parents, and community members. In a letter to community members, Presbyterian minister Rev. Robert Shirley spoke of the difficulties faced by black students. “Most of us are pretty much aware of what is causing these increased confrontations and probably we ourselves are not as yet together on what are the best solutions. You can imagine then the frustrations our youth must experience as they attempt daily to grapple with these complex problems.” Rev. Shirley then outlined a

185 Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, 83.
186 Thompson interview.
187 Letter to Julius Chambers from Operation C-U-R-E.
specific program of community action to protect the rights of black students. “Through our church offices, we plan to initiate a program of legal preventative education for young people across North Carolina and Virginia, utilizing audio-visuals, mass distribution of pamphlets and materials and one-day workshops in cluster location.”\textsuperscript{188}

Conflicts over behavioral guidelines and student discipline had a dramatic, if less public, impact on school culture on a daily basis. School officials unwittingly fueled black students’ anger over disciplinary guidelines by ignoring their other grievances regarding the implementation of school desegregation, and its negative consequences on black students. In a report summarizing the school disorders in March 1973, the author, Reginald Smith, listed “10 demands presented to the school board on 1/9/73,” which, “have not been acted upon.” The students’ grievances addressed the role of police officers on school campuses, the “firing of racist teachers,” the need for “School Board meetings held periodically in the black community,” and the creation of “Black student unions.” According to the report students “are still looking for some relief by way of these 10 demands.”\textsuperscript{189} Additionally student frustrations with other problems in the school such as the use of confederate symbols as school mascots, the lack of black teachers or coaches, content of curriculum, pushed some students to test the boundaries of the rules. Increasingly, the issue of discipline in the school became the centerpiece of black students’ critique of the public schools. Conflicts over discipline illustrated the lack of

\textsuperscript{188} Letter from Robert L. Shirley to Concerned Citizens re: Increased Problems of Youth in Relation to School & Police Agents, Box 4, Folder 1, Chambers Papers, UNCC.
\textsuperscript{189} Memorandum from Reginald Smith to Bob Valder re: Charlotte School Disorders, March 20, 1973, Box 4, Folder 2, Chambers Papers, UNCC.
cross-cultural and interracial understanding in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools during the first years of school desegregation.

Because the Department of Health, Education and Welfare’s Office of Civil Rights did not mandate reporting of data on student suspension, the full extent of the problems with the discipline of black students may not ever be fully determined. However, the available data reveals a dramatic increase in the total number of suspensions and expulsions, with percentages of minority student suspension far out of line with their relatively small numbers within schools. Suspensions and expulsions of African American students increased steadily during the first three years of school integration. “School officials had suspended about 1,500 students the year before McMillan’s first desegregation order. The following year, that number doubled to about 3,200 students and then doubled again during the 1970-1971 school year to more than 6,500 students.”

Numbers of suspensions for both white and black students also increased dramatically at the individual school level from 1969 to 1970. School officials at East Mecklenburg High School suspended 101 students in the 1969-1970 school year; the next year that number shot up to 582. Likewise suspensions at Myers Park High increased from 284 to 418 in this same time period.

Black students made up a disproportionately large number of arrests and suspensions. “Almost 90 percent of the students suspended during this time were African American. Moreover, of the 77 students arrested during the serious high school disturbances of the fall of 1971, all but 2

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190 Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 226.
191 Givens vs. Poe et al Answer of Defendants to Plaintiffs’ First Set of Interrogatories, November, 1971, Box 3, Folder 1, Chambers Papers, UNCC.
were African American.”¹⁹² A study of minority student retention rates after school desegregation completed by the Southern Regional Council (SRC) found similar results: “suspensions rose from 1,544 in 1968-1969 to 6,652 in 1970-1971. One source estimates that 90 per cent of those suspended were black.” More broadly, a study conducted by the HEW’s Office for Civil rights, which looked at 2,831 school districts that enrolled ninety percent of all minority students during the 1970-1971 school year, found similarly high numbers of minority student expulsions. HEW’s data showed that “The expulsion rate for minority students was twice that for non-minority students, and the expulsion rate for black students was three times that for non-minority students.”¹⁹³ The culture of conflict rather than academic excellence characterized southern schools in the early 1970s as well as the growing disillusionment of greater numbers of students.

Continual suspensions and expulsions could have critical long-term consequences for students. Chronic suspensions, often referred to as “infinite suspensions,” and expulsions had a particularly devastating impact on African Americans because of their already vulnerable economic situation. Statewide, African Americans made up just over forty-four percent of people living below the poverty line in 1970, compared to just 13.1 percent of whites.¹⁹⁴ A 1975 map of land use in the city of Charlotte reveals a direct relationship between the average square footage of single family residences and the race of residents. Homes in the predominantly black neighborhoods in north and west

¹⁹² Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 226.
Charlotte averaged around 1200 square feet, while homes in the lily-white southern neighborhoods consistently fell in the 2,000-3,000 square footage range. Lifetime lost income for black North Carolinians without a high school diploma stood at $51,783 for men, and $41,683 for women. Low educational attainment also had serious physical and social consequences on the state in form of lost taxes due to lower incomes, the growing numbers of residents living below the poverty line, and lost state financial aid to public schools when fewer students attended school. Additionally, as the SRC recognized, when the majority of its citizens were educated, a community was better equipped to make the economic and social adaptations necessary in a rapidly changing and increasingly global market place.

195 Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, 4. Many of the homes in north and west Charlotte averaged well below 1000 square feet. 196 *The Student Pushout*, 23.
Figure 11. Average square footage of single-family residences.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ *Average Square Footage of Single-Family Residences*, in Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, 5
Unresolved problems with disciplinary procedures and behavioral guidelines increased steadily until they reached a crescendo of violence and disorder on March 1, 1973. A wave of student protests and fights spread like wildfire through junior and

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198 Race of Residents, in Hanchett, Sorting Out the New South City, 4.
senior high schools, resulting in hundreds of suspensions, dozens of arrests and injuries, and the temporary closure of every senior high school in the system.\textsuperscript{199} In the wake of this unrest, more than 700 black parents, students, school officials, and law enforcement officers met at West Charlotte High School to discuss the uprisings. At the meeting, coordinated by the NAACP youth division, students and parents peppered school and city officials with questions about administrative disciplinary procedures and the behavior of police officers during the riots.\textsuperscript{200} One black community member asked the two police department representatives present at the meeting, “What right do police have to call black students “Niggers”? Mr. Miller and Mr. Porter responded that it was “against police policy to use Trigger words” and that students should document such incidents by recording the police officer’s name, securing a witness to the incident, and submitting signed statements.\textsuperscript{201} The police department’s response in this case illustrated its lack of desire to understand and resolve the underlying problem of deep racial animosity in the city of Charlotte. In the eyes of the justice system, it was the responsibility of the victims of discrimination to prove that an injustice had occurred. They had no intention of attacking the root of the problems between police officers and black students, deep seated racial animosities.

Black students argued that they had been punished harshly for their involvement in the disturbances, while school officials and police officers turned a blind eye to white

\textsuperscript{199} Douglas, \textit{Reading, Writing & Race}, 224.
\textsuperscript{201} Memorandum from Reginald Smith to Bob Valder. Law enforcement officers present at the meeting included Ken Miller, Assistant Chief of Charlotte Police, Department and B.L. Porter, Chief of Mecklenburg County Police Department.
students involvement. In the March 1973 report on the week’s racial disturbances, two black student’s at South Mecklenburg High School described one such incident in which white school officials appeared to single out African Americans. “Mostly black students were suspended according to students…Jackie Stewart (white) representative on the Student Coordinating Council, was reported to have jumped on a black girl and as it turned out she got suspended.”202 Once again, these charges speak to the growing resentment of black students over their treatment as second-class citizens in the schools.

Students present at the March 11 meeting at West Charlotte High School pointed out that as early as January they had presented the school board with a list of grievances. According to the students, the school board never addressed these problems. Several of

202 Ibid, emphasis in original.
203 Police officers subdue two students following a disturbance at East Mecklenburg High School, October, 1972, in Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 227.
their demands spoke specifically to this issue of discipline and the need for fair disciplinary guidelines. These demands included “The end to automatic suspensions,” “No more police on campuses,” and the creation of “Student-Faculty-Community Boards to review discipline cases.”

Near the conclusion of the meeting, Independence High School senior Robin Massey spoke to the crowd. She “charged that black students were ‘beaten, brutalized and harassed’ at her school.” She also contended that “police used ‘excessive force’ against students at the school and arrested black students first. The presence of the police on campus,” Masey added, “acted to increase tensions between students.”

Increasingly, during the early 1970s, African American students became the central actors in this movement for educational equity in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, and drew consciously from their daily experiences in the schools to shape their fight.

Discipline problems reflected systemic weaknesses in the newly integrated public schools. Hastily implemented integration plans focused almost entirely on administrative necessities like schedules, transportation, and finances, but ignored the emotional and cultural needs of students. In the fall of 1970, black and white students found themselves face-to-face in bustling hallways without the sense of common purpose that usually develops between students after years of attending school together. School integration plans based on hard and fast numerical ratios did little to build strong school communities. As a result, most students did not feel invested in their schools. Likewise, the top-down model of authority and discipline fostered a culture of control in the schools.

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204 Ibid.
205 Massey quoted in “Black Parents, Students Quiz Officials.”
and a sense of imprisonment for students which did not empower students to act as leaders and role models for their peers. As the list of grievances presented to the school board in January 1973 revealed, African American students sought direct and specific inclusion in the school reform process. Rather than regarding integration as a mess to be contained and controlled, school officials could have seen this moment as an opportunity to bring the students and their unique experiential vantage point into the educational process. Much like the Westside Parents Council had demanded greater oversight in their children’s education, these students wanted to play more active roles in charting the course of their own academic lives.

Social and cultural conditions in the schools also shaped black students’ experiences in integrated schools. Issues of contention included participation in extracurricular activities and athletics, school mascots and songs, faculty diversity, curriculum content, and the role of the media. School board members frequently dismissed black student grievances as “trivial.” Collectively, this disregard fostered a sense of resentment among black students that they had made greater sacrifices to achieve integration, but had received little in return in terms of rights and respect. The school board consistently ignored black student grievances because they sought to frame them as silly children rather than recognize their status as dedicated activists capable of crafting a sophisticated social critique and leading the campaign against racial inequity in the schools. School and city officials had long employed this tactic of ignoring student grievances as way to deny the prevalence of institutionalized racism in Charlotte. Brumit

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206 The Student Pushout, 55.
Delaine remembered his run-ins with authorities in Charlotte in a march in 1960. As DeLaine recalled, publicly the police department claimed to protect the marchers’ rights, however in private they harassed students. “Some individual policemen did some underhanded things. But, the official policy was, if y’all don’t violate any city ordinances were not going to bother you.” He continued, “They made sure there wasn’t a sergeant walking around when they did it.” As Delaine’s memories illustrate, Charlotte city officials consistently found ways to present a public face of racial tolerance, while privately discriminating against black students, thus undercutting the students’ efforts to affect change. The school board refused to admit that students could affect change as community leaders, because to recognize the legitimacy of student’s grievances would require the school board to make actual racial reforms.

Many black students also spoke of academic problems including racial tracking within the school, mistreatment by teachers in the classroom, and discriminatory curriculum. In some extreme cases, teacher discrimination against black students was blatant; however in most cases racial prejudice in the classroom manifested itself in fairly subtle ways. Lowered expectations about black student achievement in the classroom, looser enforcement of the rules for black students for fear of being called racist, and the funneling of black students in lower level courses could all fall under the category of racial prejudice. In the summary of student grievances included in a “Position Paper on Student Disturbances,” commissioned by the CAG, African Americans complained that “White teachers refer to blacks in a derogatory manner-name calling, etc.” Other

207 Delaine interview.
grievances included “a general tendency for teachers to ignore the black student” and “Some principals are phonies, make false promises.” These broad characterizations of discrimination speak directly to the climate of restlessness in the schools and the lack of understanding between black and white teachers and students. In the furor over court rulings and parent protests at the community level, the public schools lost sight of the impact of integration at the individual school level and failed to provide their teachers and schools with the support and guidance they so desperately needed.

While many black students experienced racial discrimination in the classroom, individual white teachers and administrators embraced school integration as an opportunity to improve race relations in the community and worked diligently to provide all of their students with a quality educational experience. Lucille Ross began teaching at Kennedy Junior High School in the spring of 1970, when Kennedy was a segregated black school. She described the difficulties she faced in maintaining order in the classroom and building relationships with her students during those tumultuous years. In one particular instance, Ross’s students told her that one of their classmates had brought a gun into school. “I’m sitting there thinking, what do I do now? So, I said, ‘Reginald,’ I just put my hand out on the desk, ‘Give me the gun.’ After the third time he put a .22 in my hand. My hand dropped to the desk. I could not believe that he actually gave me the gun.” Ross maintained her composure even in this difficult situation, and reinforced the importance of school behavioral guidelines. “I said, ‘Now, Reginald you know I will have to report this.’” Looking back on her experiences, Ross credited her success as an

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educator with her commitment to firm and fair behavioral guidelines and creating classroom communities based upon mutual respect. “I definitely think that young people need discipline. And they do better when you let them know that you’re not going to let them walk all over you.” Ross combined this strong disciplinary model with constant reinforcement to create a positive classroom environment focused on personal and academic growth. “My philosophy was, I’m nice to them, I respect them, then they need to be nice to me and respect me. I expected to get the same treatment. And when I didn’t, I let them know that that was inappropriate.”\footnote{Ross interview.} She embraced a pedagogy based on a mutual reciprocity and respect.

Ron Thompson, a first year teacher at Independence High School in 1971, also spoke of the importance of discipline, respect, and high expectations for students in the classroom. Thompson described the enormous challenges he faced as an inexperienced teacher at the age of twenty-one with a classroom full of eighteen-year-olds during this time of enormous turmoil. Thompson, like Ross, emphasized respect through his academic lessons and his leadership as a role model. “So there I was a first year teacher, and they’d send me some real tough characters that were almost my age,” Thompson recalled. He took a very straightforward approach to teaching and leadership emphasizing strict discipline and cooperation. “I just basically told them there was a wrong way, and a right way, and a Thompson way. And in here mutual respect and dignity would prevail. The theme, and I taught social studies, but the entire theme of that
was mutual respect and dignity.\textsuperscript{210} Thompson’s approach however was far from simple. His efforts to weave lessons of mature interracial commitment throughout his academic lessons, as a first year teacher no less, illustrate a deep commitment to the long-term development of his students and a respect for their ability to grasp these complex lessons in human nature. Although Thompson and Ross taught different groups of students, and brought their own personal experiences with race with them to the classroom, both clearly saw the emotional and intellectual fulfillment of the student as an educator’s most important task.

Symbols of racial segregation and white supremacy also added to the emotionally difficult circumstances of African American student life in predominately white schools. Although segregated schools may have ended formally, many whites maintained their cultural resistance to integration. Black students frequently complained about white students waving Confederate flags on campus, singing “rebel” team songs, and upholding other symbols of segregation and white supremacy. Whereas white students claimed these symbols functioned as harmless traditions, black students entering schools which whites had fought tooth and nail to exclude them from for years, interpreted these “traditions” in a quite different context. Tawanda Belinda Wilson-Allen, a student at North Mecklenburg High School during the first years of integration, found herself confronted daily with the physical remnants of racial oppression and violence. “Before we went to North Mecklenburg, their mascot was the Viking. Their yearbook was the Rebel. But when we got there they made it the Rebel. So you know how that made us

\textsuperscript{210}Thompson interview.
feel going in. We burned the Rebel in effigy.”211 During the first three years of integration especially, these symbols of segregation and racial animosity permeated the culture of Charlotte’s high schools.

In a 1973 “Position Paper on School Disruptions” written by the CAG, African American students complained about the use of confederate symbols on campuses. “White students waved Confederate flags, threw rocks, yelled threats of violence to black students on the bus…The nickname “Rebel”, the Confederate flag, and other such symbols are insulting to blacks and must be changed.”212 In some cases, such symbols set off physical confrontations between white and black students. Fighting which spread to five high schools on Wednesday, March 7, began at North Mecklenburg High School when a “motorcade featuring the Confederate flag” passed through campus.213 These clashes over confederate flags and symbols illustrated the deep racial and cultural divides that plagued campuses and prevented students from relating to one another as human beings.

Indeed, many schools seemed committed to limiting the influence of African Americans on student campus life, especially in positions of high-visibility and prestige. Tawanda Belinda Wilson-Allen also remembered the exclusion of African American students from student life. “There were no African American cheerleaders. There were no African American queens or any of the court even for the homecoming. No African

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212 “Position Paper on School Disruptions.”
American majorettes, no one for the Carousel Princess.”\textsuperscript{214} Wilson-Allen’s recollections held true for other Charlotte high schools as well. During the 1970-1971 school year at East Mecklenburg, where just under a quarter of the student body was black there were no black varsity or junior varsity cheerleaders, majorettes, or letter girls. Although the student body voted for a separate “Afro-American” beauty queen, white students held all the other traditional beauty superlatives.\textsuperscript{215} Athletics and other such groups had a similar racial makeup at Independence High School. Whites dominated the homecoming court and junior and sophomore beauty courts. Similarly, only three black students served on the sophomore, junior, and senior executive committees, which functioned much like the student council.\textsuperscript{216}

Many African American students also spoke of the difficulties they faced in joining extracurricular groups because they felt unwelcome in majority white groups, or because they depended more heavily on school buses for transportation, which left immediately after school. Timothy Gibbs who attended West Charlotte High School during this period spoke of the impact transportation had on African American students’ educational experiences. “I used to wonder how you could get involved in extracurricular activities when you lived that far away from the school. So I think you lost a sense of community more so than anything else.”\textsuperscript{217} In this way, integration plans that assigned greater proportions of black students outside of their neighborhoods

\textsuperscript{214} Wilson-Allen interview, SOHP.
\textsuperscript{216} Independence High School Yearbook, 1972, CMPL.
\textsuperscript{217} Timothy Gibbs, interviewed by Pamela Grundy, May 27, 1998, Interview K-0480, SOHP.
restricted African American students’ access to student life outside of the classroom, effectively keeping them as perpetual outsiders.

In some cases, African American students felt that school administrators specifically sought ways to limit their participation. “Lack of transportation for students who wish to participate in school activities is one means of keeping the black student ‘out of these activities.”218 Black involvement in extracurricular groups varied considerably between the high schools, although leadership groups like the student council and class government became increasingly integrated during the 1973-1974 school year. However, at both East Mecklenburg and Independence High School, white students held between eighty and eighty-five percent of positions on the student council and class government offices.219 The lack of African American student representation in student leadership and academic groups had more than just symbolic importance. The student council especially, served as a significant space of student activism and leadership, in which students had greater access to school administrators and the decision making process. Black exclusion from these groups not only sent a strong message to the student body about the relative place and importance of African Americans within the school community, but also prevented black students from expressing their concerns and problems to the administration in an orderly fashion. Pushed out of the mainstream reform process, black students had little choice but to find alternative ways to air their grievances.

218 “Position Paper on School Disruptions.”
Frustrations and tensions regarding school organizations and culture manifested themselves in a variety of ways including agitation for and the creation of black student organizations. African American students’ complaints to the school board and other school officials frequently highlighted the lack of resources to support their needs. At the community meeting held in the wake of the March 1973 disorders, community members complained to Superintendent Rolland Jones that many white school officials worked actively to prevent the establishment of black student groups. “Why can’t student organizers establish NAACP Chapters on high school campuses without undue hassle from school principals, white teachers?” a community member asked. Jones had little response other than to note the establishment of a NAACP youth chapter at East Mecklenburg High.

Despite the apparent discouragement from some school officials, African Americans created many vibrant student groups during the early 1970s. A group of black students created the all-black Afro-American Club at East Mecklenburg in 1970 “for the purpose of creating an awareness of Black heritage.” In 1970 and 1972, East Mecklenburg and Independence High respectively offered academic courses on black culture and history. Aside from these organizations, however, few white school groups had many African American members, and the vast majority of student leadership positions continued to be held by white students. In this way, officially integrated schools remained substantively segregated. More often, black students turned outside of the schools for organizational support of black students’ needs. Moving outside of the

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220 Memorandum from Reginald Smith to Bob Valder.
boundaries of the schools, both physically and intellectually, black students of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools called their peers to action in a 1973 critique of the system’s treatment of minority students. “We deem it necessary at this time to meet on a broad level to plan appropriate actions to change these conditions. In this light, we are having a meeting at 7:30 P.M. ON TUESDAY NIGHT, NOVEMBER 14, 1972, AT THE OIC AUDITORIUM ON 9th AND GRAHAM STREETS.”222 Black students, recognizing the stifling influence of white school officials, reached out to the surrounding black community to energize their campaign. Their move to begin organizing outside of the schools represented a new stage in the development of these student activists because they had begun to define themselves not only as students, but as community leaders. Black student organizations, both within and outside of the schools, illustrated black students’ desire to carve out spaces of minority identity and empowerment, and to make their voices heard in both the school community and the city at large.

By 1973, signs of the beginning of change appeared at several of Charlotte’s high schools. The most significant progress came at East Mecklenburg High School. In the fall of 1972, long time Principal D.K. Pittman retired in the wake of four days of student disturbances during the week of October 23. John Smith, director of the science and math programs for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools, served as interim principal while Superintendent Rolland Jones began the search for a permanent principal for East.223 That spring, the school system named West Charlotte High School Assistant Principal Leroy “Pop” Miller as East Mecklenburg’s new principal. Unlike many black students.

222 Letter to Julius Chambers from Operation C-U-R-E, emphasis in original.
223 “East Students, Faculty Make Peace,” Charlotte Observer, November 6, 1972, p. 1A.
principals who lost their positions during school desegregation, school officials in Charlotte actively recruited Miller to become the principal of East Mecklenburg High in 1972.

Figure 14. Leroy “Pop” Miller, Charlotte, 1972. 224

224 CMPL.
Discord and resentment had clearly defined the 1971-1972 school year in the eyes of many students as shown in that year’s message from the senior class, “This year, class unity/disunity was obvious at the annual Senior Banquet…. East had an impact on all she touched. No Senior could escape the fragmented influence this school had on him.” The 1973 school yearbook, by contrast, described this period of chaos in the fall of 1972 and attributed the subsequent change in tone to Principal Miller. “These disturbances, which included fights, running and pushing in the halls, and massive skipping of classes, had many influences on the year at East.” Yet, “Mr. Miller earned the gratitude of East for stepping into a position of awesome responsibility, in which he would face the task of making East the type of school ready to fit the diverse needs of 2400 students.”

Resolution of the crises in the schools would require strong administrative leadership, the healing of badly fractured student bodies, and the recognition of black student leaders. Immediately, Miller began the process of bringing the school’s focus back to academic achievement. “My philosophy has always been expectations are your seeds of success. You're not going to get any more out of life than you expect.” Miller recognized that the educational needs of students had been lost in the midst of the court battles over desegregation and pupil assignment, and that a renewed focus on academics could bring unity to a badly fragmented student body. Principal Miller encouraged students to police their own behavior. “When I went to East Mecklenburg we had a student congress, and the president of the student congress said to me, "Mr. Miller we're talking now. The student congress says we'd like to have a break during the morning."

225 Leroy Miller, interview by Pamela Grundy, June 8, 1998, interview K-0174, SOHP. [Hereafter cited as Miller interview.]
This approach also allowed Miller to lighten teachers’ load of disciplinary duties. “And I said to him, "Yeah. I'll give you a break if you'll govern yourself, but I'm not going to ask the teachers to govern you twice a day." Schools in which the majority of students felt invested, and that had real avenues of leadership could more easily withstand the forces of racial tension and misunderstanding. Miller represented the importance of strong leadership by school administrators and faculty members in bringing peace back to the schools, and creating fulfilling, truly integrated educational communities. His leadership has been widely praised by both white and black students, school officials and community members.

H.L. Hawkins, another African American principal, who assumed the role of principal at Independence High School in 1975, also felt that academic and behavioral expectations could play a central role in making integrated schools function. Ron Thompson, who taught under Hawkins at Independence, recalled Hawkins as a man who believed that all students could achieve academic excellence. “He told me, he called me Doc…He’d say, ‘Doc, if the floor is the ceiling, that’s as high as they gonna go.’ Okay? And he’d say, ‘We’re going to raise the bar, we’re going to raise the floor Doc.’” Although both Principals Miller and Hawkins brought their own experiences and strengths to their work, they shared a strong commitment to the needs of students which contributed heavily to their success as leaders.

Thompson recalled a program at Independence High School in which a school van went to pick up parents for parent-teacher conferences living in the nearby public

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226 Miller interview.
227 Thompson interview.
housing development, Fairview Homes, in order to facilitate black parental involvement. “Most of the people living in the projects over there, it was quite a burden for them to get a taxi, because they depended on public transportation because they didn’t have a place to park a car in public housing… what we did was we were allowed to purchase a school van. It was a used van, and we had an auto mechanics department and they brought it up to speed, and we painted it green and gold.” This program illustrated the administration’s incredible commitment to detail, and their awareness of the unique circumstances of low-income African American communities. Programs like this made parents and the broader community, not just students, feel like they belonged to the school community. Hawkins understood the importance of community building as a central tradition of black education. “Mr. Hawkins did a lot to be inclusive; he was very sensitive to that particular sector of the population. He had a very good report with the community, and as far as the neighborhood parents were concerned, they took a lot of pride.” Once again, school culture proved crucial to academic success. “It was a situation where people wanted to be there, and it was an inviting atmosphere. So it was positive and very uplifting.”

Whereas the school board consistently undermined student activism and trivialized black student’s experiences, leaders like Miller and Hawkins actively sought ways to bring students into the decision making process, and empower them as leaders in their schools.

Although the improvements at East and Independence certainly owed much to leaders like Miller and Hawkins, the focus on student needs and the incorporation of all students into a shared community, played a central role in bringing order back to campus.

228 Thompson interview.
The easing of racial tensions by 1973 manifested themselves most clearly in the improved social and cultural climate. That year, East became the first school in Charlotte to have an NAACP Youth Chapter. The chapter’s purpose was “To inform youth of the problems affecting black people and other minority groups…to develop an intelligent and militant youth leadership through devising, working out, and pursuing local programs.” 1973 also marked the beginning of the Human Relations Council which emphasized cooperation and organization across racial lines. According to the yearbook, “They sponsored workshops with role playing to help them identify problems and deal with them openly through free dialogue and exchange of ideas.” The public face of the school had also begun to change with the integration of student groups. Six of the nineteen cheerleaders and letter girls were African American in 1973. Shifts in these student organizations reflected the increasing inclusion of black students in their schools, and the greater willingness of school administrators to create spaces of student leadership.229

A broader shift in the climate of the public schools had also begun to take hold at the community level by 1973. That year the majority of school board members moved forward gingerly in the development of a new integration plan that met Judge McMillan’s standards. The board took a significant step toward creating more inclusive, fulfilling school communities when it invited representatives of various community organizations to share their input on school integration. Margaret Ray, a white middle-class mother and former high school teacher from southeast Charlotte, headed the CAG, which developed out of these meetings. In June, 1974 Ray and former Central High School Principal Ed

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229 “East Wind,” 1973, CMPL.
Sanders, completed an integration plan that provided for the greatest degree of system wide desegregation to date. Additionally, their plan called for the assignment of students from Eastover, one of Charlotte’s wealthiest white suburbs, to the historically black West Charlotte High School. Within one month, both the plaintiffs and the school board, with some characteristic foot dragging, approved the plan. The efforts of the CAG mirrored the recognition on the part of growing numbers of white Charlotteans that desegregation was inevitable and that continued turmoil over integration would only hurt Charlotte’s public image.

Black students wanted fairly simple things from their schools. First, they demanded respect from school officials, administrators, and their peers. Visible symbols of a racially segregated past like the Confederate flag should have no place on an integrated campus. Likewise the use of racial epithets could not be tolerated. Second, black students wanted to be included in the cultural and social life of their schools. Inclusion in extracurricular groups, athletic teams, and leadership organizations gave black students a sense of belonging, which, in turn, fostered a stronger commitment on their part to building relationships with their white peers. In other cases, black students wanted support from school administrators to form black student groups like NAACP youth chapters and African American cultural and social organizations. Fundamentally, black students wanted the same rights and responsibilities as their white peers. Not surprisingly, more than fifteen years of white resistance to school desegregation in Charlotte had fostered deep resentment and frustration among many black Charlotteans.

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230 Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 236.
In order to make integrated schools work, school administrators would have to make bolder efforts to consider the needs of black students, and build a community of teachers, students, and parents. Schools like East Mecklenburg High and Independence which ultimately succeeded in bringing order and an academic focus back to their campuses, did not reach consensus easily. It required daily and often painstaking work, to build coalitions among students, teachers, and parents.

Black students in Charlotte faced enormously difficult situations in integrated schools in the early 1970s. School integration plans created by the school board, and largely approved by Judge McMillan’s court, unabashedly placed the heaviest burdens on black students and their communities. School officials and political leaders failed to provide white and black students with sufficient support as they faced this monumental task of building true cooperation and community across racial lines in their daily lives. Like their activist predecessors of the 1960s who had fought to secure the importance of black educational traditions in white controlled public schools and challenge white elite's stranglehold over the city, black students aggressively pursued more equitable models of school desegregation. They combined a number of different protest methodologies and ideological strategies; they sought inclusion in existing school organizations, founded black student groups, articulated their grievances directly to school officials, and tapped into existing networks in the black community. Through each of these avenues, black students sought both the privileges and responsibilities, which they correctly recognized as their rights as citizens. And yet, school officials continued to cast black students grievances aside because to acknowledge the legitimacy of their claims would be to
admit the unequal distribution of power and resources in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools. This neglect inevitably fueled rising racial tensions, the outbreak of physical confrontations among students, and the incidents of police brutality attested to by African American students. Newspaper reports, police records, and student suspension and expulsion rates testified to the rising climate of conflict in schools and the weakening academic focus. Black students who decried the simmering racial tensions in the schools recognized that school communities had to address these conflicts in order to avoid all-out race war in the schools. Even when violence did come to the schools, black students and some white allies remained committed to the creation of strong school communities, speaking of their rights to equal treatment and inclusion in the schools. Their contributions illustrated the faith these students, like many of their activist predecessors, had in the power of education to liberate and empower. The students of West Charlotte High School spoke directly and passionately of the power of student leadership to facilitate the process of school desegregation in their 1971 yearbook.

The Students of West Charlotte High have been given a unique opportunity to show their commitment to change. As an all-black school, we saw the racial question from a unique vantage point. Now we are different, black and white-TOGETHER. There have been problems. But the more important thing is integration worked. Let us show you the way to understanding. Let us show how we made the best of the transition. We united gradually; through participation; through sportsmanship, and through study. We are very much together."231

In the face of enormous obstacles and conflict these students turned not to bitterness, but to each other.

231 “The Lion,” West Charlotte High School Yearbook, 1971, CMPL.
CONCLUSION

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Those were the major issues. The Constitution said these are things that you should have. Well, they didn’t exist for us.”  

August 1, 1960: twenty-two African Americans marched in front of the school board meeting place carrying signs that read, “School Board, Stop Dehumanizing Our Children-Desegregate.”  August 2, 1969: 1,200 protestors took to the streets of downtown Charlotte to voice their opposition to the school board’s plans to close seven historically black schools.  March 11, 1973: more than 700 black parents, students and community members gathered at West Charlotte High School and interrogated white and city school officials on their treatment of African American students.  These are just three of the thousands of moments in the narrative of black educational activism in Charlotte in which African Americans advocated for their educational rights as citizens.  Collectively, these scenes paint a picture of one local African American community incredibly engaged in their children’s lives and fiercely proud of their educational traditions.  In their fight against the discriminatory policies of the white-controlled public schools, African Americans drew on a wide range of protest methods, built alliances across racial and class lines and built up a number of different organizations.

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s public schools became the flashpoints in a hotly contested battle for social, political, and economic power in Charlotte.  During nearly 100 years of racial segregation and white supremacy a small circle of wealthy

232 Salim interview.
white Charlotteans secured an iron grip over the city’s affairs. After a brief stint of political victories by the Fusion party around the turn of the twentieth century threatened to bring poor whites and blacks together in a substantive challenge to white elite rule, wealthy whites moved to reconsolidate their power. Like their counterparts across North Carolina, wealthy whites recognized the potentially revolutionary nature of this interracial working class alliance, and mobilized to crush the Fusion party. For much of the next fifty years, white professionals controlled the city’s affairs with relative ease as they accumulated more power and wealth and restricted black Charlotteans to increasingly overcrowded and impoverished neighborhoods in downtown and west Charlotte.\footnote{Hanchett, \textit{Sorting Out the New South City}, 81-87.}

With the \textit{Brown} ruling in 1954, wealthy white Charlotteans sensed a real threat to their political and economic kingdom. City politicians had long worked with school officials to create a public school system which maintained the status quo. Although North Carolina--and Charlotte particularly--claimed to follow a more moderate brand of racial politics, North Carolina’s leaders had created and maintained a public school system which restricted African American opportunity in no uncertain terms.\footnote{In many places across the South, whites manipulated high school curriculums in Rosenwald Schools to keep African American’s out of skilled professions. By restricted African American students’ access to liberal arts education they aimed to keep the status quo socioeconomic order intact. See James Anderson, \textit{Education of Blacks in the South}, 223-229.} \textit{Brown} represented a moment of real change in the lives of white and black Charlotteans. The end of separate school systems would mean that African American students would finally have access to the same physical and financial resources as white students. White
Charlotteans who benefited from the status quo understood that once black and white students were in the same classrooms, it would be far more difficult to track black students into lower-paying jobs and the margins of society. For African Americans, *Brown* was a moment of both great excitement and apprehension. Black Charlotteans sought to take advantage of the new opportunities offered in integrated schools to challenge the white socioeconomic structure, while maintaining the cherished educational traditions they had built up under segregation. This mix of conflicting emotions, interests, and goals practically guaranteed chaos in the schools.

Indeed, conflict over the schools defined much of the 1960s and early 1970s in Charlotte. Although tactics, rhetoric, and organizational structures fluctuated in the period between 1960 and 1974, African Americans remained focused on a constant set of goals. First and foremost, they wanted schools in which their children had the space to express and explore their racial identity, while also being accepted as part of the larger school community. A successful school would have to find this delicate balance between autonomy and inclusion. In practical terms this would be a school in which black students had the freedom to organize student chapters of the NAACP or black cultural groups, while simultaneously being represented on athletic teams, cheerleading squads, and student government organizations. Second, they demanded respect. Time and time again in their critiques of white school officials activists insisted that the school board treat them with dignity. Desegregation plans which systematically shut down black schools, laid off black educators, assigned black students to white schools far away from their neighborhoods showed blatant disregard for the black community and its
educational traditions. Activists argued that school officials should seek the input of the black community not just out of a sense of misplaced obligation, but because African Americans had valuable insight and experiences to bring to the table which would help the entire community.

In a sense, the demands of black educational activists are strikingly moderate and practical. Like in the case of the Westside Parents Council shows, they refused to have their children shuttled into an old facility no longer considered good enough for white students. They wanted inclusion. When African American students first entered white schools in large numbers in the fall of 1971, they argued that they should have places on the sports teams and extracurricular activities. The creation of black studies programs and black student organizations mirrored the quest for cultural pluralism which has defined the American experience for millions. A desire for complete and unfettered citizenship, and all of the rights and responsibilities that go along with it, motivated thousands of black Charlotteans to speak out for racial justice in the schools.

The passion and community mobilization apparent throughout this period contradict much of the traditional narrative of African American education and school desegregation history. Contemporary images of pathological, disillusioned, educationally disinterested black urban communities have permeated the public consciousness through underclass theories which gained respectability beginning in the late 1960s. Until recently, the bulk of historical and sociological research on black urban communities focused on the so-called “culture of poverty” in inner-cities characterized by high levels of chronic unemployment, female-headed families, children born out of wedlock, and
crime. As Michael Katz has argued, “The word underclass conjured up a mysterious wilderness in the heart of America’s cities; a terrain of violence and despair; a collectivity outside politics and social structure.” Daniel P. Moynihan’s controversial *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* drew from the findings of earlier studies on the African American family, such as E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States.* In 1965, the Moynihan Report argued that flaws within the black community made it impossible for African Americans to manage either the benefits or responsibilities of citizenship. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new group of underclass theorists expanded the portrayal of black urban communities somewhat with recognition of the role economic decentralization played in the creation of pockets of concentrated racialized poverty. However, like their earlier counterparts, their analyses rested upon the assumption that social dysfunction created and perpetuated this “urban crisis.”

Scholars engaged in this underclass debate gloss over the systemic marginalization of African American communities in cities like Charlotte through federal, state, and local government programs. These works ignore the role which Federal Home Loan Banking System zoning maps and racially discriminatory banking practices of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation denied African Americans access to

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237 Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, 45.
low-interest home loans and kept them from buying homes outside of racially segregated inner-city neighborhoods. Moreover, the flight of industries, and subsequently middle and upper class white families out of the inner city, left inner cities with a rapidly shrinking tax base to fund public services like schools.\textsuperscript{238} Although compared to cities like Detroit or Philadelphia, Charlotte had a substantially smaller downtown area, and until the late 1960s the four central city districts—first, second, third, and fourth ward—which had predominantly African American populations. In addition, Brooklyn, a neighborhood located just to the east of downtown, was also historically black and incredibly poor in the 1950s and 1960s. However, like in many other urban centers, in the late 1940s city planners began razing these inner city neighborhoods to make way for convention centers, corporate banking centers, and hotels. Urban renewal plans forced huge numbers of newly dislocated African Americans in cities like Charlotte into increasingly concentrated, run-down sections of town.\textsuperscript{239}

Within the last ten years, a number of scholars have begun to tackle these myths of cultural deviancy and criminality within urban black communities by grounding our analysis of contemporary urban issues within the historical context. Despite this, these images of the rotting, apolitical inner cities maintain a strong place in the popular imagination.\textsuperscript{240} The prevalence of these theories seriously distorts the record of black

\textsuperscript{238} Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 4 and 45.
\textsuperscript{239} Hanchett, Sorting Out the New South City, 248-251; and Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 45-51.
urban and specifically educational activism, by downplaying the severity of the systems of institutional racism in urban areas. Ultimately, the white power structure in all its reincarnations—real estate agents and developers, banks, local politicians, and policy makers at the federal level—is let off the hook for its role in creating and maintaining deeply impoverished, racially segregated communities, within our nation’s cities. As Thomas Sugrue astutely notes in his analysis of urban inequality in Detroit, “Those arguments—however discredited by rigorous scholarly research—continue to appeal to those who believe that the causes and solutions of social problems start and end with poor people themselves.”241 In downplaying the power of these institutions of urban racial segregation, we also devalue the accomplishments of grassroots black activists who effectively resisted racially discriminatory policies. These images reinforce myths of apolitical black urban communities disinvested in their community institutions. The long and varied record of black educational activism in Charlotte clearly contradicts these dangerously pervasive myths about the historic and contemporary relationship between African Americans and education. If one accepts these stereotypes at face value, how do we account for the masses of average black Charlotteans who fought relentlessly, day in and day out, in pursuit of quality education?

Contemporary debates in the mainstream media about the state of the nation’s public schools, especially urban schools, inevitably focus on the failures of minority students. Debates about the public schools are peppered with words like “crisis,” “urgency,” and “collapse” painting a picture of crumbling public schools on the verge of

total collapse. This image reinforces the pictures of minority communities totally apathetic about their education and the schools popularized by the media. However, this portrayal of African American community’s relationship with education is entirely detached from the historical context of African American education, and the deep roots of educational activism in black communities dating back to slavery.242

Through the committed efforts of such activists, and with the help of some valuable white allies, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools achieved an impressive degree of racial integration in the schools. The creation of a much more equitable integration plan in 1974 signaled a shift in the broader community towards recognition of the value of racially egalitarian education reform models. At least from a statistical standpoint, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools made enormous progress towards desegregation in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Davison Douglas, “A 1987 report prepared for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights concluded that of the nation’s 125 major school systems analyzed, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system had achieved the greatest amount of pupil mixing between 1967 and 1985.”243 School integration also altered student’s academic experience. Beginning in 1974, achievement test scores rose steadily, and by 1981 had reached a record high level. Black student test scores increased substantially between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, although the gap between white and black student achievement remained substantial. Although improvements in test


243 Douglas, Reading, Writing & Race, 245-246.
scores certainly suggest a greater level of retention of learning material by students, 
standardized tests do not adequately measure many other significant indicators of 
intellectual abilities including critical thinking skills and leadership abilities.

Perhaps more importantly, the creation of egalitarian school reform models in the 
mid-1970s coincided with a period in which greater numbers of Charlotteans became 
involved in city politics. Black activists’ success in ending segregated schools served as 
a model for other social, political, and economic reform movements in Charlotte. Most 
notably, school integration coincided with greater efforts to increase residential 
integration. In 1975, the Charlotte City Council established a policy to distribute public 
housing developments throughout the city in an effort to facilitate greater school 
integration, and “became one of the first cities in the United States to coordinate its 
public housing and school desegregation policies.”244 The political legacy of the battle 
over school desegregation was the end of the at-large election system which had been in 
place since 1917. As noted by historian Tom Hanchett, “In 1977 voters won a major 
modification of the system that had restricted political access in Charlotte since the days 
of disenfranchisement. Henceforth only four city council members would be elected at-
large; the majority-seven-would be elected from individual districts.” In addition, 
Harvey Gantt became the city’s first African American mayor in 1981.245 As the 
economic and political developments of the 1970s and 1980s illustrate, the benefits of 
school desegregation extended far beyond the classroom.

244 Ibid, 248.
245 Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*, 211 and 225.
However, the fight for quality and equality in the public schools did not end when Judge McMillan ended court supervision in July 1975 as several notable scholars have claimed. Historical trends defied simple categorization in Charlotte, just as they did everywhere. The frustration and isolation felt by many black students attending predominantly white schools in the early 1970s did not magically disappear in 1974. Resentment and racial tensions linger. The development and maintenance of truly emotionally and academically integrated school communities takes time and serious commitment that desegregation plan and court orders alone can not produce.

Assessments of educational quality based on standardized scores alone often present dangerously distorted views of students’ complete educational experience. As the rich history of black education reveals, the value of an education transcends physical measures. No test can account for the racial pride, sense of empowerment, and leadership skills that great schools bring minority students.

After a fairly brief period of progress dismantling segregated school systems, judicial support for integration began waning in the mid to late 1970s. *Milliken v. Bradley* and *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* placed significant restrictions on the application of *Brown* for school desegregation, and limited the use of race-based policies in school integration plans. These rulings marked the beginning of a period of rapid resegregation of the nation’s schools which has prompted a new generation of scholars to debate the value of school integration and *Brown*. Today, increasing numbers of public schools are characterized by racial and economic

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segregation, financial insolvency, and poor-educational achievement. Noted desegregation scholar Gary Orfield argued in favor of school integration in *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*, which he coauthored with Susan Eaton of the Harvard Project on School Desegregation. Orfield and Eaton outlined the dire social and political consequences of increased racial segregation, and argued for a renewed commitment to integration. They argued that integrated schools open greater future life opportunities to minority students.

“Desegregation itself is certainly not a cure-all for inequality in society. Racial and socioeconomic integration in schools and housing should be viewed as preconditions for equalizing routes of access and an unequal structure of opportunity.” Integrated schools provide both white and black students with opportunities to build relationship across racial and class lines which are the backbone of a harmonious society. In a convincing argument for the value of integrated schools, the authors assert that an integrated educational experience is absolutely crucial to an individual’s ability to succeed in a multi-cultural world.  

In 1999 public support for school integration in Charlotte formally ended. In September, U.S. District Court Judge Robert Potter overturned the *Swann* ruling and declared the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools unitary, marking the beginning of a period of rapid resegregation in the city’s schools. The suit began in 1997 with a group of white parents who, relying on the decades-old rhetoric of color-blind meritocracy, argued that their children had a right to attend their neighborhood schools. The plaintiffs’

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arguments in this case brought the narrative of school desegregation and civil rights activism in Charlotte full circle. They contended that race based student assignment policies violated the Civil Rights Act, and that such plans violated students’ right to attend the school of their choice. Their assertions mirrored a larger trend of such arguments in the wake of the Bakke decision that advocated for supposedly race-neutral school policies. Conveniently ignoring the welfare the federal government provided whites in the form of highway subsidies, low-interest home loans, and a bevy of social service programs, the plaintiffs asserted that racially based assignment guidelines unfairly discriminated against white students. Their reasoning drew from a long tradition of New Right conservatism which sought to roll back the social programs of the New Deal, and which ultimately fueled the collapse of the New Deal coalition.248 The plaintiffs found a willing ally in Judge Potter, who had a long history of opposition to race-based assignment policies as a vocal leader of the anti-busing movement in Charlotte in the early 1970s.249

The ruling brought rapid and distinct changes to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools. From the time Potter’s ruling went into effect in 2001 until 2002, the number of elementary schools with more than 90 percent minority enrollment increased from nine to sixteen. After the school board created a so-called race neutral student assignment plan in 2002, the schools underwent a rapid transformation. “In the very first year of neighborhood assignments, the number of schools with minority enrollment of 91% to 100% more than doubled, and the number of racially identifiable schools jumped

249 Smith, Boom for Whom?, 162.
from 47 to 81 schools. Two years later, 87 (out of 150) schools were racially identifiable.” Charlotte could no longer claim to be “the city that made it work.”

Just beneath the surface of contemporary myths about black urban communities, lies a rich record of black educational activism and community mobilization. Men and women of different ethnic, religious, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds came together around the need for intellectually rigorous, emotionally supportive, personally empowering schools. While an enormous amount of community solidarity fueled the movement, divisions within the black community over protest methodology also played a significant role in its direction. Leaders like Fred and Kelly Alexander, Reginald Hawkins, and George Leake all brought their own experiences and leadership styles to bear on the movement, and at times conflicts between leaders created considerable friction. Ultimately however, black Charlotteans surmounted their differences in pursuit of their shared goals. African Americans in Charlotte resisted school board plans which shut down black schools, fired black educators, and destroyed the bonds between communities and their schools not because they were opposed to integration itself, but because they refused to relinquish their educational traditions. Schools were one of the few sources of community pride, racial empowerment, and social, political, and economic empowerment during Jim Crow. In response to school integration plans which targeted these most valuable community resources, African Americans in Charlotte embraced a flexible protest methodology. Throughout this period of enormous social upheaval and change, black Charlotteans’ protests centered on fundamental issues of

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human dignity, equality, and respect. Ultimately, behind all of the protests, boycotts, marches, and court cases stood a faith in the rights of individuals to have access to the rights granted to citizens under the Constitution. They wanted what they should have had.
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