

1991

Desegregation of Public Schools in Pinellas County, Florida

James Anthony Schnur

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.usfsp.edu/fac_publications

Recommended Citation

Schnur, James A. "Desegregation of Public Schools in Pinellas County, Florida." *Tampa Bay History* 13 (Spring/Summer 1991): 26-43.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Works at Digital USFSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital USFSP.

DESEGREGATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA

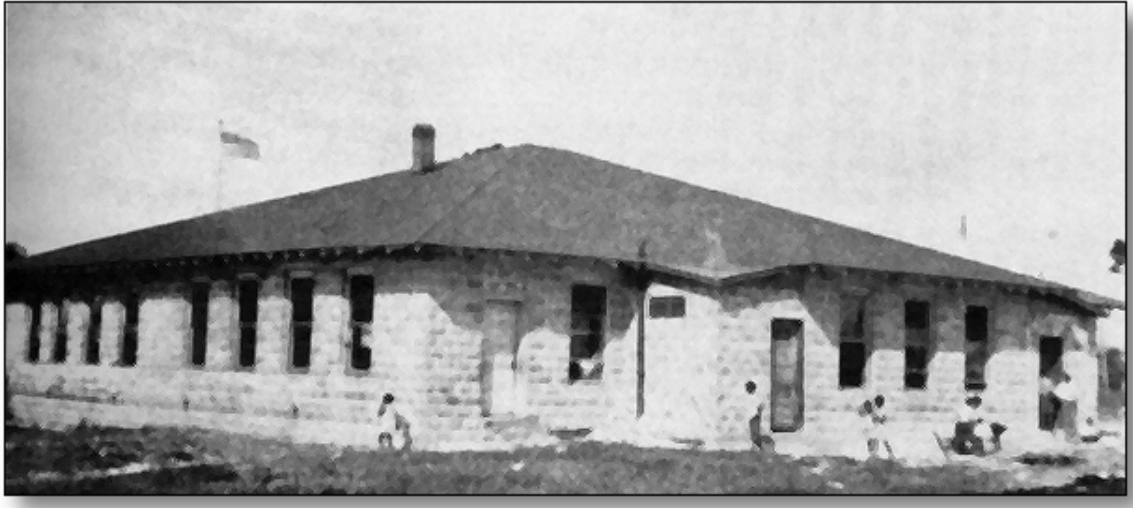
by James A. Schnur

During most of its existence, the Pinellas County School Board operated separate and unequal school systems based upon race. School officials did not act in isolation: executive, legislative, and judicial pronouncements at the federal and state levels, compelled the district to codify Jim Crow practices. Furthermore, the school board maintained segregated facilities until regional and national influences assisted local leaders in their battle to dismantle dual schools. The movement in Pinellas County exemplified a larger struggle between integrationists and segregationists. Both groups knew that education shaped society, but each hoped to create an essentially different community. This study of the battle to formulate a unitary system of public schools in Pinellas County assesses the role of individuals, organizations, and government officials.

By the time Pinellas residents seceded from Hillsborough County in 1911, a new constitution and state laws had segregated the peninsula's common schools. The Hillsborough Board of Public Instruction permitted John Donaldson, the earliest black settler on the southern Pinellas peninsula, to enroll his children at Disston School in the 1870s. But after the Compromise of 1877, Democratic politicians abrogated the constitutional rights guaranteed to blacks during Reconstruction. Article XII, Section 12 of the 1885 Florida constitution legitimized school segregation by stating that "white and colored children shall not be taught in the same school, but impartial provision shall be made for both." Local school officials followed the state constitution by opening the St. Petersburg Negro School in 1893. Two years later, legislators in Tallahassee enacted a statute prohibiting any school from boarding or teaching whites in the same facility as blacks.¹

The state superintendent of public instruction and court decisions further strengthened the policy of racial segregation. In his 1894-1896 biennial report, Superintendent William N. Sheats asserted that "the Christian people of this State are conscientious and sincere in their belief that the races ought not to be educated together." Paternalistically, he believed that white taxpayers and philanthropists would continue to offer financial support to black schools only if the races remained in separate classrooms. In the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, the United States Supreme Court adjudged that "separate but equal" facilities did not infringe upon the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Ten years later Florida Supreme Court's opinion in *Patterson v. Taylor* reaffirmed state-sanctioned segregation. In 1912 the newly-created Pinellas Bond of Public Instruction operated twenty-two schools, four of which served black children.²

Similar to other districts in Florida, Pinellas County schools failed to offer black students the same opportunities accorded to their white counterparts. Although Dixie M. Hollins, the county's first superintendent of public instruction, hired many talented black teachers from the Tuskegee and Hampton institutes, these teachers faced formidable curricular and financial barriers. While the district funded nine-month terms and offered instruction through the high school level to white pupils, blacks attended school only six months annually and could not progress beyond the eighth grade. Coursework for blacks centered on manual training and domestic science rather



Pinellas Junior-Senior High (c. 1935) was built in Clearwater for black students in north Pinellas County.

Photograph from *Tradition of Excellence*, edited by Patricia Perez Contrini.

than academic disciplines. School officials expected black education to meet the white community's needs by emphasizing industrial skills such as broom making, sewing, mending, and laundering. Until 1927, black children sang and performed to raise additional dollars to keep schools open for the entire six-month term.³

Segregation laws exacerbated disparities between black and white facilities. State statutes expressly forbade any integration in dual school systems other than the hiring of white supervisors to oversee black schools and teachers. After the state's economy faltered in 1926 and fewer whites subsequently moved to Pinellas County, the school board converted an unopened white elementary school on a four-acre parcel in central St. Petersburg into Gibbs Junior-Senior High for black students. Gibbs opened without electrical lighting or adequate equipment. By the early 1930s, the district erected Pinellas Junior-Senior High, a concrete shanty for blacks residing in northern Pinellas County. Although enrollment immediately exceeded capacity at both schools, officials refused to expand the campuses or utilize empty facilities in white neighborhoods. Thus, when the school board vacated the newly constructed Rio Vista Elementary in 1935 due to low student enrollment, it illustrated that it would allow a facility to fall into disrepair rather than permit black students to attend school in a white subdivision.⁴

While the district used buses to transport white children to segregated schools during the 1930s and 1940s, it did not offer transportation for blacks. The school board assigned buses to white children who lived beyond walking distance from their neighborhood schools, but expected African-Americans to provide their own transportation. The fact that buses loaded with white pupils passed nearby Gibbs en route to other schools angered Principal George W. Perkins. When Perkins sought buses for blacks living more than two miles from Gibbs, the school board denied his request. Perkins and the Gibbs faculty then purchased buses without school board funding. Because the district never compensated the Gibbs staff for the buses, drivers had to



Rio Vista Elementary School on Macoma Drive Northeast in St. Petersburg was abandoned in 1935 due to low enrollment by white students. In 1950 it was remodeled and re-opened.

Photograph from *Tradition of Excellence*, edited by Patricia Perez Contrini.

collect exorbitant fares from the children.⁵ Thus in terms of curriculum, funding, facilities, and transportation, the Pinellas Board of Public Instruction maintained two inherently unequal school systems.

The Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education* threatened the institutionalized segregation found in Pinellas schools. Asserting that public education had become one of the government's chief responsibilities during the twentieth century, the Court unanimously contended that dual school systems based upon race violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Because this class action decision involved numerous areas with differing local conditions, the Court withheld a final verdict until states could file additional briefs.⁶

The black community heartily welcomed the first Brown opinion. James A. Bond, Pinellas County's supervisor of Negro education, proclaimed that the decision would dismantle the caste system which had pervaded race relations throughout American history. He did not foresee the riots and calamities predicted by segregationist doomsayers. While many African-Americans adopted a cautious "wait-and-see" attitude, most believed the Court took an important step by making the government conform to its constitutional principles. The Reverend Enoch Davis concluded that the justices needed to overturn *Plessy* to restore public faith in the federal system. Although St. Petersburg Junior College – a postsecondary institution operated by the school

board – refused to admit two black co-valedictorians of Gibbs High School for the 1954 fall term, Principal John Rembert commended school officials for taking “a sane, unhysterical. Approach” to the decree. After the Court reheard arguments, blacks in Pinellas County eagerly anticipated the second *Brown* decision.⁷

However, the second *Brown* decision in 1955 failed to provide timely redress for the inequalities caused by segregation. Instead of establishing a definite schedule for desegregation, the justices mandated “prompt and reasonable compliance. . .with all deliberate speed,” and ordered lower courts to consider local conditions when enforcing the decision. Therefore, the 1955 *Brown* opinion did not answer three important questions: when desegregation should begin, how school systems should abide by the 1954 verdict, and when complete desegregation would become mandatory.⁸

Officials at the state level refused to comply with the ambiguous ruling. Governor LeRoy Collins and Attorney General Richard Ervin appointed members to the Fabisinski Committee, a panel of jurists who sought legal means to circumvent *Brown*. In the 1956 “School Assignment Law,” the committee decided to maintain the state’s public schools, determine the best educational interests for pupils, and mitigate hostilities between classes or groups of citizens. This law required local school boards to enroll pupils based on orderly and efficient administration, effective teaching, and the consideration of general welfare. The committee permitted local districts to perpetuate segregation by classifying students on criteria other than race, such as aptitude and scholastic proficiency. One member of the committee argued that the Supreme Court construed the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to require equal, not identical, facilities. When the legislature failed to enact a constitutional school-closing measure, Florida’s school superintendent placed the responsibility for desegregation on individual county boards of instruction.⁹

Ingrained patterns of segregation existed at the administrative level as well as in the individual classrooms of Pinellas schools. As late as 1940, the district stored records of currently employed teachers in separate files based upon race. In the 1954-55 directory, white supervisors and school faculty listings preceded those of black supervisors and schools. The only “integration” accomplished immediately after *Brown* occurred when the 1955-56 directory arranged supervisor and school faculty listings in alphabetic order. An advisory committee created to study petitions filed by black parents considered alternative zone systems, but Superintendent Floyd T. Christian thought the courts would permit Pinellas schools to remain segregated if the district acted in good faith to upgrade facilities in black neighborhoods. Realizing that organizations such as the National Urban League could offer proof that the school board knowingly operated overcrowded and substandard schools for blacks, district officials decided to respond to *Brown* by constructing Gibbs Junior College and nine new black schools between 1954 and 1963. By September 1956, Christian boasted that such improvements made schools “separate but really equal.”¹⁰

When school officials evaluated community attitudes towards desegregation in August 1955, they discovered that many white leaders supported massive resistance. The White Citizens Council of Pinellas presented appeals from white parents who called for continued segregation. A county political leader pledged to establish a private tutoring system for students who did not want to attend integrated schools. The Board of Control, which supervised Florida’s state

universities, published an alarming report which included surveys of white and black high school seniors. Nearly two-thirds of Pinellas County's white respondents believed the state should use legal means to deny blacks admission to state universities. By comparison, over ninety percent of the African-Americans replied that the state should integrate these institutions. In line with white resistance, Pinellas County School Board members rejected a plan by a University of Florida political scientist to desegregate the first two grades in September.¹¹

Given the resistance of white officials, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and religious organizations initiated the struggle to abolish dual schools in Pinellas County. Under the leadership of Dr. Ralph Wimbish, the local branch of the NAACP joined with the United Churches of St. Petersburg and the St. Petersburg Ministerial Association to dismantle Jim Crow legislation.¹² White supremacists responded by carrying wooden replicas of rifles and threatening integrationists. One minister found a message attached to a rifle which proclaimed: "Death to all race mixers! Keep your public schools white by massive armed force – Be a Paul Revere! Rally your neighbors to arms. Shoot the race-mixing invaders."¹³ Such threats strengthened the NAACP's resolve. In the fall of 1959, an NAACP attorney accompanied eleven blacks who sought admission to the first classes offered at Dixie Hollins High School.

C. Bette Wimbish, Dr. Ralph Wimbish's wife, also became involved in the movement. She protested against overcrowded black facilities as well as the district's halfhearted solutions to problems facing black students. Although state regulations required forty-acre parcels for senior high school campuses, the school board intended to construct a new black high school on a two-acre site in Campbell Park. In March 1960, Wimbish ran for a seat on the school board. Although she lost the election, she garnered 10,000 votes in an area with only 3,800 black electors.¹⁴

Although boycotts and other protests led to the peaceful desegregation of many of St. Petersburg's stores and lunch counters by early 1961, schools remained segregated. Officials hoped to forestall the widespread abandonment of the dual system by sanctioning piecemeal desegregation at a few border schools. Token integration began in the summer of 1961 when two black students enrolled at St. Petersburg Junior College. That fall a black attended Tomlinson Vocational School, and a white matriculated in a vocational course at Gibbs. Although African-American parents filed over nine hundred applications by October, nominal desegregation of children did not begin until September 1962. At that time three blacks entered secondary schools without incident. A year later, Superintendent Christian promised that the district would no longer bus blacks away from the closest school. The school board claimed it permitted 118 blacks living in white attendance zones to enroll in nearby white schools, thereby creating a neighborhood system. While Christian praised this gradualist approach, the state's NAACP leadership hoped to hasten the process by urging blacks to "shed their shackles of inequality" and demand a plan which required whites to share the burden of integration. According to the Florida Advisory Committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission, Pinellas school officials assigned a handful of blacks to white schools to feign compliance with Brown and forestall further court action. But as blacks continued to receive little cooperation from the district, they sought additional relief through the courts.¹⁵

The legal attack on Pinellas County's dual system began with a class action suit filed in the U.S. District Court in Tampa on May 7, 1964. Leon W. Bradley, Sr., a police officer and vice president of the Clearwater NAACP, met with four other Clearwater residents and an individual from St. Petersburg. This group agreed to challenge the school board's gradualist strategy. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund assigned a young attorney named James Sanderlin to the case. In *Bradley v. Board of Public Instruction of Pinellas County*, Sanderlin argued that nearly a decade after Brown, less than two percent of the county's black pupils attended desegregated schools. He contended that the district permitted whites to transfer to all-white schools, while blacks could enroll in a white school only if it was the nearest facility. Although this policy violated Title IV and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which forbade discrimination in federally assisted programs, Pinellas County continued to secure federal funds.¹⁶

On January 15, 1965, the court ordered the district to present a comprehensive plan that eliminated dual attendance zones and reassigned pupils, faculty, and other personnel on a non-racial basis. On March 15, the school board claimed that all elementary schools and adult programs operated on a unitary basis. It pledged to provide unitary zones for all remaining facilities by the 1968-69 school year. To comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and receive federal assistance, board members agreed to submit their plan to Washington. Although the district continued to secure federal funds, only two-thirds of the county's 107 primary and secondary schools experienced desegregation by September 1965.¹⁷

While Sanderlin and the NAACP fought for a comprehensive plan, the school board quietly integrated its postsecondary institutions. Trustees at St. Petersburg Junior College assumed control of Gibbs Junior College and renamed it Skyway Campus. After attempts to bring whites to this facility failed, the board decided to close Skyway and enhance academic programs on the newly-opened Clearwater campus. This decision influenced desegregation struggles in other counties as well. More than two-thirds of Gibbs' students resided in Hillsborough, Polk, Sarasota, and Manatee counties. When Pinellas officials prohibited school board members in Bradenton from transporting students to Gibbs in August 1966, they assumed that Manatee Junior College would enact an open admissions policy.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Sanderlin filed new motions to remedy inequalities at the primary and secondary levels. Specifically, Sanderlin contended that the district refused to recruit teachers from black colleges, maintained segregated athletic programs, and allowed white students residing in black school zones to obtain special attendance permits. However, Federal Judge Joseph Lieb denied these motions in November 1965 and April 1966. Judge Lieb ruled that school board members did not have prior knowledge of the race of applicants granted permits or have any special plan to segregate faculties and administrative personnel. Although 6,700 blacks attended desegregated schools during the 1966-67 term compared to 739 pupils two years earlier, Sanderlin viewed such statistics as misleading since most schools remained predominantly black or white.¹⁹

While local NAACP director Roy Holmes met with Superintendent Thomas Southard to discuss the district's gradualist pace, Sanderlin continued to place his faith in the courts. He realized that tokenism simply prolonged both economic and racial discrimination. Although there was no significant difference for funding of black and white schools after 1962, every tradition ally-black elementary school met the disadvantaged criteria of the 1965 Elementary and Second-

ary Education Act (ESEA). Even though Sanderlin argued that the county's schools remained out of compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, he did not want the federal government to suspend all funds. Pinellas County used ESEA Title I funds to supplement expenditures in black schools. Additionally, Sanderlin knew that these facilities often lacked essential supplies because the district purchased them with fees collected from students. For example, at one school so few pupils could afford to pay the fee that the district did not provide mimeo paper for one month, writing paper for three months, or soap for nearly a year.²⁰ Disgusted by such conditions, Sanderlin filed for further relief

Judge Lieb's decision on March 6, 1969, ordered the district to enact a comprehensive desegregation plan that took into account a Supreme Court ruling issued during the previous term. In *Green v. New Kent County* the justices asserted that "freedom of choice" plans which brought about little desegregation failed to convert districts into unitary systems. The Court clearly expected school boards to correct past injustices as well as prevent future discrimination, and it required school boards to abandon tokenism and create truly integrated systems.²¹ Therefore, when Judge Lieb approved a plan that retained all-black schools in August 1969, Sanderlin petitioned the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

The Fifth Circuit modified the *Bradley* decision on July 29, 1970. The judges determined that Pinellas County retained a dual system in violation of the Supreme Court's decisions. The judges did affirm that the district operated a unitary system with respect to majority-to-minority transfer rights, extracurricular activities, facilities, and the assignment of faculty and staff. But they found that single-school neighborhood zones preserved student segregation. During the 1969-70 term, sixty-six percent of Pinellas County's African-Americans attended predominantly black schools. The modified plan approved by Judge Lieb would have reduced this figure by only two percent. By clustering and pairing schools through common attendance zones, the Fifth Circuit Court desegregated all but three of the county's schools.²²

Although district officials instituted the clustering program during the fall of 1970, litigation resumed in the courts. White residents in the Largo area hoped that Pinellas Circuit Court Judge Charles R. Holley would invalidate the court-ordered clustering of five schools which they viewed as an "illegal and void desegregation plan." On September 14, 1970, Holley concurred with the plaintiffs, noting that clustering apportioned different grade levels to each school. Such a plan violated state statutes requiring all elementary schools to include the first six grades. Meanwhile, Judge Lieb assailed the school board for keeping Gibbs High School open with a predominantly black student body. NAACP officials contemplated further legal action as the school board readily approved pupil transfers for whites from heavily-integrated city schools to suburban enclaves. As many whites in southern Pinellas abandoned the public schools, both the school board and black plaintiffs hoped to alter the court order, each for different reasons. While the school board petitioned the United States Supreme Court to rescind the clustering plan, the black plaintiffs wanted whites to share more of the burden. After the Supreme Court denied the petition on May 3, 1971, Sanderlin filed another motion.²³

When the Pinellas County School Board finally adopted an effective countywide desegregation program on June 2, 1971, another U.S. Supreme Court decision played a pivotal role. In *Swann v. Charlotte -Mecklenburg*, the Justices granted lower courts broad powers to order cross-district

busing if patterns of school construction, school abandonment, and pupil assignment indicated that dual systems existed. Sanderlin had filed a motion in May 1971 that urged the District Court to desegregate all schools by September. A week later board attorney John Carlson concurred with Sanderlin and acknowledged for the first time that the district did operate a dual system. Carlson realized that if the school board failed to enact an adequate plan, Judge Lieb could impose more drastic measures. Board members also wanted to settle the issue. "This means too much to the children," Vice Chairman Calvin Hunsinger proclaimed. "I've come to the conclusion that the parents and the county are waiting for this gutless board to make a decision." To the chagrin of Superintendent Nicholas Mangin and School Board Chairman Ron Fisher, a majority ratified the revised plan and submitted it to Judge Lieb. Thus, Pinellas County became the first system in Florida to approve a voluntary, all-inclusive desegregation plan.²⁴

Judge Lieb, following the lead of higher federal courts, required Pinellas school officials to comply with one of the most comprehensive desegregation plans in the United States. Because school officials had acted in good faith, he did not believe the District Court needed to oversee daily school operations. Instead, he ordered the district to abandon paired and clustered schools, modify existing zone lines, and implement satellite zones for white elementary students. These zones rotated on a biennial basis to avoid white flight. Additionally, no school's black enrollment could surpass the thirty-percent limit established by the court. Furthermore, he designated the local branch of the NAACP as a third party to monitor the district's compliance with the order. On July 23, 1971, Judge Lieb ordered full implementation of the new plan for the 1971-72 school year.²⁵

Immediately, white opposition to busing intensified. The United Residents of Pinellas (URP) and Parents Against Forced Busing (PAFB) never successfully merged, but their members shared a common goal: They hoped to nullify the court decision and restore the concept of neighborhood schools. While the URP usually restricted its activities to court litigation, PAFB advocated outright defiance. PAFB Chairman Sam Buice, and members Gwen McCook and Grace Tilka, dominated the organization. They prepared suits against the "funky five" board members who had approved the plan, distributed school officials' home telephone numbers, and called for parents to seek exemptions to the compulsory attendance law by claiming they could not properly clothe their children. When Superintendent Mangin invalidated most of the petitions, PAFB leaders promised that over 20,000 pupils would boycott the opening day of school.²⁶

The PAFB found allies at the local, state, and national levels. Chairman Fisher wanted Judge Lieb to vacate the order, and he brazenly supported PAFB's attempts to help parents circumvent attendance laws in direct violation of the district's policy requiring individual board members to "act impartially on principle, uninfluenced by personal prejudices, political considerations, or mere popularity seeking." At a large rally held at Al Lang field, members of the Pinellas County legislative delegation condemned forced busing and supported a constitutional amendment proposed by Congressman C.W. "Bill" Young. The amendment sought to prohibit cross-busing to achieve artificial racial balances. The PAFB commended former Governor Claude Kirk for his unyielding stand against busing by naming him honorary national chairman of the organization, even though his attempts to interpose state sovereignty while governor had jeopardized Florida's public schools. Demagoguery flourished at the local level as grassroots leaders emulated

President Richard Nixon's condemnation of the Supreme Court's school desegregation opinions.²⁷

Many white Pinellas County residents repudiated PAFB's agenda as a mockery of justice, a way to exacerbate racial tensions, and a threat to the region's economic progress. They argued that antibusing proponents confused the goal with the means. For decades the school board had used buses to segregate pupils by race. The *Bradley* decision simply compelled the district to redress past disparities by busing students as a means to attain the goal of integration. A grassroots organization known as Citizens for the Preservation of Public Schools abated rumors circulated by foes of integration. In their monthly newsletter, leaders of the biracial Upper Pinellas Council on Human Relations called for a unitary system. Businessmen meeting at the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution urging the district to enact a fair countywide desegregation plan. In addition, the *St. Petersburg Times* consistently supported busing on its editorial page.²⁸

As classes resumed on September 7, 1971, PAFB's threatened boycott never materialized. Although Claude Kirk boasted that nearly 10,000 children stayed home, district records counted only 2,000 no-shows. Indeed, during the first ten days of the term, almost 4,200 new students matriculated in the system. These increased enrollments necessitated an extension of the four-mill levy passed two years earlier, but the PAFB persuaded voters to reject a school referendum for the first time in the county's history. While PAFB supporters cheered as School Board Chairman Ron Fisher defiantly campaigned alongside PAFB leaders, the millage's defeat on September 14 made children innocent victims of racial demagoguery. Sam Buice's claim that "if you vote for even one mill, you're voting for a school bus" certainly appealed to many white parents. But Floyd Christian, now serving as the state's education commissioner, regretted that parents voted against improvements in their children's schools by refusing to extend the millage.²⁹

Funding matters notwithstanding, school officials implemented the desegregation plan. Surprisingly, only two campuses – Dixie Hollins and Boca Ciega high schools – experienced prolonged racial discord. In October 1971, a student biracial committee suggested that Dixie Hollins drop the Confederate flag as its unofficial symbol. With PAFB support, a group known as Parents and Students for Dixie organized motorcades to "restore equal rights to whites" by brandishing the Rebel flag and harassing black "interlopers." Black nationalist Joe Waller's Junta of Militant Organizations (JOMO) responded by organizing a boycott by black students. Segregationists soon revived the Pinellas chapter of the White Citizens Council.³⁰ Chairman Ron Fisher reacted to the violence that seized Boca Ciega a month later by claiming, "The whites aren't going to take any more of what they've been taking."³¹ Fortunately, racial tensions at Dixie Hollins and Boca Ciega subsided by the end of the first semester.

Despite these problems, the district complied with court-imposed modifications to the plan, and some schools took additional steps. A week after Judge Lieb died in 1971, Judge Ben Krentzman issued the "now" order of November 9. Judge Krentzman stipulated that no school could exceed the thirty-percent black enrollment limit, and he called for the immediate transfer of students to bring the district into compliance.³² While the school board and the court evaluated desegregation in terms of busing and pupil ratios, some leaders at individual schools fostered an



Floyd T. Christian, a 1933 graduate of St. Petersburg High School, went on to serve as Superintendent of Public Instruction for Pinellas County from 1948 to 1965, when he became State Superintendent of Public Instruction. He then assumed the new post of Commissioner of Education, serving until 1974.

environment where students could move beyond desegregation to achieve integration. Therefore, when school officials originally anticipated difficulties at Northeast and Gibbs High Schools, administrators secured the confidence of the students, the faculty, and the community. Northeast High School's principal eased the transition for blacks by inviting them to the campus before the fall term began and by establishing and supporting biracial committees. Leadership at Gibbs High School preserved the black community's historic ties to a school that became ninety-one percent white.³³

The district's judicious administration of the court order resulted in both school and housing market stability. Private school enrollments had nearly doubled between 1967 and 1972, before the school board adopted a definitive plan, but fewer parents withdrew their children from public schools after 1972. Residents in Pinellas County, as well as the state's other counties, realized that they could not move to a different municipality to avoid interracial schools. Florida's 1968 revised constitution required school districts to coincide with county lines, and by the mid-1970s all sixty-seven counties had desegregated their schools.³⁴

The public reaffirmed its commitment to Pinellas County's schools under Superintendent Gus Sakkis. Board members promoted Deputy Superintendent Sakkis when Nicholas Mangin, a superintendent who never welcomed desegregation, resigned under fire in June 1972. Sakkis, the sixth superintendent in seven years, provided much-needed stability and integrity by becoming a staunch supporter of desegregation. During his nine years as superintendent, he restored public confidence to a system that had experienced student unrest, two teacher strikes, and declining academic standards, as well as the busing controversy. He regarded busing as the quickest and most efficient means of creating a unitary system. He concluded that most advocates of neighborhood schools did not oppose busing per se, just busing for racial balance.³⁵

Organized and vociferous opposition to the court plan waned after the 1971-72 school year. With the exception of a brief period of rioting at seven junior and senior high schools in February 1973, the racial strife anticipated by anti-busing groups never materialized. PAFB and the White Citizens Council disappeared by late 1973. The National Socialist White People's Party, formerly the American Nazi Party, protested at a few school board meetings but never garnered support in the white community. Furthermore, leaders in the black community repudiated JOMO's demands for autonomous black schools. James Sanderlin, who had become a county judge, urged blacks to work within the system because militancy or separatism would subvert past accomplishments.³⁶

Ten years after the plan went into effect, the district commissioned a Pinellas County Task Force on Busing to evaluate the court plan and offer suggestions. Jerry Castellanos, the newest and youngest member on the school board, proposed that his colleagues vote to abolish the plan because it victimized children who "had nothing to do with bringing about slavery, segregation, or race problems." Similar to Ron Fisher, Castellanos befriended anti-busing activists. The Resident Organization for Academic Research (ROAR) formed in 1981 to call for an end to all busing and to restore the concept of neighborhood schools. But the Task Force's recommendations prevailed, and the district made few changes in its desegregation plan.³⁷



Black students were bused to Madeira Beach Middle School in the 1970s as part of the county's desegregation plan.

Photograph from *Madiera Beach Middle School Galleon*.

Black leaders remained steadfast in their commitment to unitary schools. NAACP leaders like Roy Holmes and Morris Milton worked with biracial advisory committees to assure that white parents abided by the order. Holmes once remarked, "Let some of those white kids ride buses.... School bus seats aren't for blacks only; whites can sit in them, too." The NAACP's vigilance prevented school officials from closing facilities in black neighborhoods, and this required whites to share the burden of busing. Citing the disproportionate number of black suspensions during the late 1970s, the NAACP and the Council on Human Relations filed a suit to halt racially discriminatory discipline policies.³⁸ Although some black leaders instituted a "Sack Sakkis" campaign during the late 1970s, they could not deny the progress achieved by the school system during his term.

Since assuming the superintendency in 1981, Scott Rose has viewed busing as the only feasible means of maintaining a unitary system. He realized that if the court lifted its order, candidates would soon challenge current board members on the single issue of busing and resegregated neighborhood schools would result. During the 1983-84 school year the district initiated two programs at south county schools to attract students from throughout Pinellas. Students from as far north as Tarpon Springs boarded buses to attend classes at the Artistically Talented Program at Gibbs and the Program for the Academically Talented at St. Petersburg High School. Federal Judge William Terrell Hodges approved a joint agreement between the district and the NAACP to supplant the thirty-percent limit with a floating quota. This amendment allowed the school board a grace period to redraw zone lines instead of requiring the immediate transfer of pupils to restore compliance with the order. Criticism of racial desegregation abated throughout the 1980s.³⁹

The busing controversy took on new dimensions as certain communities achieved residential integration. By the mid-1980s Lakewood High School, centered in an integrated neighborhood in

southern St. Petersburg, fell out of compliance as the number of blacks exceeded the floating limit. This situation posed a dilemma for the NAACP: In order to preserve the court order, it had to compel the board to bus pupils out of an integrated community. When the school board planned to transfer children from their Lakewood neighborhood to the Gandy area in northeastern St. Petersburg, residents proud of their integrated community formed the Southside Neighborhoods Coalition. This grassroots organization sought to become a party to the original lawsuit and release the Lakewood area from the court order. But Perkins Shelton, executive director of the local NAACP, and district officials argued that white flight and resegregation would result if the District Court modified or closed the court order. In July 1990, Judge Hodges concurred when he ruled against the Southside Neighborhoods Coalition. School officials may resolve the imbroglio by placing a magnet school on the Lakewood campus, as they did at Gibbs and St. Petersburg High Schools. Thus, the struggle continues to this day.⁴⁰

In conclusion, efforts to dismantle Jim Crow education in Pinellas County required leadership at the local level. Leaders in the black community considered equal educational opportunity an important goal in the civil rights struggle. Dr. Ralph Wimbish, C. Bette Wimbish, and the Reverend Enoch Davis demanded an end to the dual system during a period when rabid segregationists threatened to abolish schools rather than desegregate them. The *St. Petersburg Times* and local business leaders also advocated peaceful desegregation. They realized that a massive resistance movement would jeopardize Pinellas County's drawing power as a popular destination for tourists and northern transplants. In addition, new grassroots leaders who emerged in Pinellas County generally endorsed the busing plan. Since 1972, superintendents and board members have resolutely asserted that busing helps blacks without hurting whites. To them, its economic costs seem inconsequential when weighed against its benefits to the community.⁴¹

State and national leadership also contributed to the desegregation of Pinellas County's schools. Governor Claude Kirk's defeat in 1970 signaled an end to demagoguery by the state executive. After assuming the governorship in 1971, Reubin Askew became busing's champion and spokesman. He saw busing as a means to correct inequalities. In an address given at the Florida PTA Congress in November 1971, Askew declared, "We must decide whether apartheid is what we really want in this country – be it de facto or de jure." State leaders of the Young Democrats, League of Women Voters, NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference praised his stand. Education Commissioner Floyd Christian, Pinellas County's superintendent from 1948 to 1965, also welcomed Askew's leadership.⁴² James Sanderlin relied on the national offices of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to support court litigation. The United States District Court, Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, and the United States Supreme Court each provided a forum for civil rights lawyers to argue their cases. One federal judge that had an important impact on the local movement was Judge Joseph Lieb, whose decisions legitimized school desegregation plans throughout central Florida.⁴³

Today the Pinellas County school system, with an enrollment of nearly 92,000, has the twenty-first largest district in the nation and the fifth largest in Florida. The district provides transportation for approximately 40,000 students each day, yet less than a quarter of those pupils travel by bus to maintain compliance with the court order. Neither the school board nor the NAACP considers busing a panacea, but they vigilantly defend the court order from critics who seek a return to the mythic neighborhood school.⁴⁴

Leon Bradley and a handful of other black parents forced the Pinellas County School Board to fulfill its constitutional obligations. The elder Bradley had little sympathy for those who complained about busing. He remembered when the district transported blacks from Tarpon Springs to attend classes at the substandard black Pinellas High campus in Clearwater, even though they passed by numerous white schools along the way.⁴⁵ In retrospect, he revealed why he became a party to the suit: “I was looking out for my own behalf Even if the rest of the blacks didn’t give a damn . . . I wanted my kid to have a good education.”⁴⁶ Leon Bradley, Jr., never attended an integrated public school in Pinellas County. He neither testified in court nor paid a penny in legal fees. Yet the court case that bears his name remains open today to assure that Pinellas County’s schools serve the best interests of all students.

¹ Douglas L. Fleming, “Toward Integration: The Course of Race Relations in St. Petersburg, 1868 to 1963” (M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1973), 4-5; *Constitution of the State of Florida Adopted by the Convention of 1885, as Amended – 1958* (Tallahassee: Secretary of State, 1958), 31; Patricia Perez Costrini, ed., *A Tradition of Excellence, Pinellas County Schools: 1912-1987* (Clearwater: Pinellas County School Board, 1987), 11-15; Chapter 4335 of 1895 Acts cited in *General Statutes of the State of Florida* (St. Augustine: Record Company, 1906).

² *Biennial Report* (Tallahassee: Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1897), 51-52, 188; Fleming, “Toward Integration,” 8-13.

³ Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 17-20; *Report of the Board of Public Instruction of Pinellas County, Florida* (n.p., 1920), 70-71.

⁴ Joseph Tomberlin, “The Negro and Florida’s System of Education: The Aftermath of the *Brown* Case” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Florida State University, 1967), 15-16; Fleming, “Toward Integration,” 19-23; Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 21-22, 87, 200-01.

⁵ St. Petersburg *Weekly Challenger*, September 27, 1975.

⁶ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), 492-95; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 707.

⁷ *St. Petersburg Times*, May 19, 20, August 20, 1954. For a common white supremacist reaction to *Brown*, see: Joseph P. Kamp, *Behind the Plot to Sovietize the South* (New York: Headlines, 1956). A copy is stored in box 139 of the LeRoy Collins Papers, University of South Florida Special Collections.

⁸ Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 724-25, 730-36, 742; *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955), 300-01; Tomberlin, “Negro and Florida’s System,” 73.

⁹ Thomas D. Bailey and Richard Ervin both openly claimed to strongly support segregation. See: “Statement on Parent-Option Plan,” February 2, 1959, Collins Papers, box 139; Harrell R. Rodgers, Jr., “The Supreme Court and School Desegregation: Twenty Years Later,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 89 (Winter 1974-75): 755; J. Lewis Hall, “Florida’s School Assignment Law” (Tallahassee: State Department of Education, 1956), 3-4, 6, 910, 14-15; Arthur O. White, “Florida’s State School Chief and Desegregation,” *Integrated Education*, 12 (July/August 1974): 33-34.

¹⁰ Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 30; Works Progress Administration, *Inventory of the County Archives of Florida No. 54, Pinellas County* (Jacksonville: Florida Historical Records Survey Project, 1940), 283-84. See also: *St. Petersburg Times*, August 30, 1981; Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888-1950* (Norfolk: Donning Co., 1988), 306.

¹¹ *Southern School News*, 2 (August 1955): 9 (November 1955): 4 (February 1956): 11; Manning J. Dauer, “Report on Florida School System as Affected by the United States Supreme Court Decision, *Oliver Brown v. Board of*

Education of Topeka, etc.,” unpublished report of July 5, 1954 in Collins Papers, box 139; *Study on Desegregation, Part II* (Tallahassee: Board of Control, 1956), appendix 2: 6-7, 11-12.

¹² Fleming, “Toward Integration,” 54, 61, 81.

¹³ *Southern School News*, 6 (December 1959): 11.

¹⁴ Fleming, “Toward Integration,” 53, 57-58; *Southern School News*, 6 (October 1959): 5.

¹⁵ Fleming, “Toward Integration,” 56; *Southern School News* 8, (July 1961): 16, (October 1961): 11; *Southern School News*, 10 (September 1963): 9, (October 1963): 14; *St. Petersburg Times*, November 10, 1963, August 30, 1981; “Operation Bootstrap,” Speech of October 6, 1966 in Atlanta in Floyd Christian Papers, P.K. Yonge Collection at the University of Florida, box 1; Florida Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Constitutional Principle vs. Community Practice: A Survey of the Gap in Florida* (Washington: n.p., 1963), 10-12.

¹⁶ Darryl Paulson and Milly St. Julien, “Desegregating Public Schools in Manatee and Pinellas Counties, 1954-71,” *Tampa Bay History* 7 (Spring/Summer 1985): 33; *St. Petersburg Times* June 1, 1964, August 30, 1981; *Civil Right Act of 1964*, PL 88-352, Titles IV and VI.

¹⁷ *Bradley v. Board of Public Instruction of Pinellas County, Florida*, cited as Civ. Action #64-98-T before Circuit Court and 431 F.2d 1377 (1970) thereafter. 15 January 1965 decree; Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 35; *St. Petersburg Times*, January 28, 1965.

¹⁸ Walter Lee Smith, “A Study of Black Public Junior Colleges in Florida: 1957-1966” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Florida State University, 1974), 79, 85-87, 98-100; Raymond Rapp, “The Failure of Massive Resistance: The Law and Social Change in Manatee County, Florida,” (M.A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 1972), 87, 100.

¹⁹ James Sanderlin, “Proposed Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law” in *Bradley v. Board of Public Instruction*, April 1966; *Bradley v. Board of Public Instruction*, September 19, 1966 order; *St. Petersburg Times* September 21, 1966, July 24, 1971.

²⁰ Gus Sakkis, “A Financial Analysis of Disadvantaged and Nondisadvantaged Black and White Elementary Schools in Pinellas County for the Years 1962-1972” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of South Florida, 1975), 34-37, 84-85; *St. Petersburg Times*, September 20, 1968, May 25, 1970; Stephen K. Bailey and Edith K. Mosher, *ESEA: The Office of Education Administers a Law* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 144, 149-50; “Lawlessness and Disorder: Fourteen Years of Failure in Southern School Desegregation,” (n.p.: Southern Regional Council, 1968), 7, in Collins Papers, box 455.

²¹ Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 766; *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, 391 U.S. 430 (1968), 436-38; G. Scott Williams, “Unitary School Systems and Underlying Vestiges of State Imposed Segregation,” *Columbia Law Review*, 87 (May 1987): 800-04.

²² *Carter v. West Feliciana Parish School Board*, 396 U.S. 290 (1970), 294; *Race Relations Law Survey*, 2 (September 1970): 94-95; *Bradley v. Board of Public Instruction*, 431 F.2d 1377 (1970), 1378-79, 1383.

²³ *Race Relations Law Survey*, 3 (July 1971): 51; *Stancil Small v. District School Board of Pinellas County, Florida*, Pinellas Circuit Court Civil # 16,040: 27; *St. Petersburg Times*, August 12, August 14, 1970, March 11, 1971, September 3, 1981.

²⁴ A survey of 40 realtors indicated that buyers with young children sought homes in nonbusing areas. Some realtors said that salesman carried official school zone maps. Instead of advertising homes as being “near schools,” homes in non-busing areas were marketed by saying children could “walk to school.” Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 767-68; *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 402 U.S. 1 (1971), 7, 15-16, 21, 28-29; James Sanderlin, “Memorandum of Law in Support of Plaintiffs’ Motion for Further Relief” in *Bradley v. Board of Public*

Instruction, May 18, 1971; *St. Petersburg Times*, May 19, 29 June 2-4, 1971, July 24, 1971, August 30, 1981; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, August 6, 1971, August 25, 1984.

²⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, July 24, 1971, August 30, September 1, 1981.

²⁶ Robert Hooker, "School Crisis in St. Petersburg," *New South*, 27 (Winter 1972): 49; *St. Petersburg Times*, July 24, August 14, 1970, July 13, 24, 25, September 1, 7, 1971; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, August 4, 1971; Robert Hooker, *The Times and Its Times, A History* (St. Petersburg: Times Publishing, 1984), 66-67

²⁷ Floyd T. Christian, "An Analysis of the Philosophy and Policies of the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction" (M.A.E. Thesis, University of Florida, 1950), 6; Hooker, "School Crisis," 49-50; Rapp, "Failure of Massive Resistance," 151-53; *St. Petersburg Times*, January 25, August 14, 1970, July 25, August 21, 26, September 11, 1971; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 11, 1970.

²⁸ Rapp, "Failure of Massive Resistance," 3; *St. Petersburg Times*, March 5, May 29, August 18, 26, 31, 1971, August 23, 1972, March 3, 1974, August 30, 1981; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, August 7, 1971; Upper Pinellas Council on Human Relations Newsletter (February 1970); "Resolution Regarding Desegregation of All County Public Schools," St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce, March 12, 1971; Meyer Weinberg, "Chronicle of Race and Schools," *Integrated Education*, 10 (March/ April 1972): 80.

²⁹ After voters defeated the extension of the four mill levy, Superintendent Mangin convinced the school board to approve funds so the district could purchase additional buses from the state purchasing pool. Pinellas Representative Ed S. Whitson, Jr., responded by prefiling a bill (HB 4452) for the upcoming 1972 legislative session to prohibit the purchase of buses for court-ordered desegregation plans. The measure never passed, but it indicated that many legislators did not respect orders issued by federal courts. *Journal of the House of Representatives, 1972 Regular Session* (Tallahassee: State of Florida, 1972), 934. See also: *St. Petersburg Times*, June 14, September 8, 12, 16, 1971; Remarks to the Tallahassee Torch Club, Floyd Christian Papers, P.K. Yonge Collection at the University of Florida, box 3.

³⁰ Hooker, "School Crisis," 51-52; *St. Petersburg Times*, October 28, 30, November 7, 17, 19, 1971; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, October 16, 18, 1971.

³¹ Hooker, "School Crisis," 49; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 3, 4, 7, 11, 1971.

³² *St. Petersburg Times*, November 11, 25, December 16, 1971, February 3, 1972.

³³ Dudley Clendinen, "Two Schools Are Making Integration Work," *Florida Schools* 34 (January/February 1972): 6-10; *St. Petersburg Times*, March 3, 1974; *The Scene* 12 (*St. Petersburg Evening Independent* weekly magazine) October 6, 1979.

³⁴ Everett Cataldo, Michael Giles, Deborah Athos, and Douglas Gatlin, "Desegregation and White Flight," *Integrated Education* 13 (January/February 1975): 4; Meyer Weinberg, "Chronicle of Race and Schools," *Integrated Education*, 11 (November/ December 1973): 8; *St. Petersburg Times*, May 19, 1978, August 31, September 3, 1981.

³⁵ Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 36; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 10, 1980, April 19, 1981, January 8, 1990; Comments by Gus Sakkis in *Minority Rights and Reverse Discrimination: Proceedings of a Symposium Held November 15, 1976*, Darryl Paulson and Steven F. Lawson, eds. (St. Petersburg: University of South Florida, 1976), 38-41.

³⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, February 6, 9, December 9, 1973; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, February 22, 1973, March 5, 1973.

³⁷ *St. Petersburg Times*, January 12, March 8, May 2, 14, August 30, 1981.

³⁸ Meyer Weinberg, "Chronicle of Race and Schools," *Integrated Education* 10 (March/ April 1972): 79-80; Roger Clendening, "School Suspensions: Race or Class?" *Black Enterprise* 10 (June 1980): 61; *St. Petersburg Times*, November 9, 12, 1971, April 13, 1977, December 10, 1980, August 30, 1981.

³⁹ *Bradley v. Board of Public Instruction*, May 18, 1977, order of amendment, November 19, 1980 stipulation by both parties; Costrini, *Tradition of Excellence*, 42-43; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 10, 12, 1989, February 25, 1990.

⁴⁰ *St. Petersburg Times*, February 15, June 1, 2, July 19, 1990.

⁴¹ Fleming, "Toward Integration," 2; Enoch Douglas Davis, *On the Bethel Trail* (St. Petersburg: Valkyrie Press, 1979), 82-83; Gaillard, *Dream Long Deferred*, xix; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 28, 1980.

⁴² Reubin Askew, "Temporary Hardship or Continuing Injustice," *Integrated Education*, 10 (January/February 1972): 5; White, "Florida's State School Chief," 37; Robert Hooker, "Busing, Gov. Askew, and the Florida Primary," *New South*, 27 (Spring 1972): 25-28.

⁴³ *St. Petersburg Times*, August 30, 1981.

⁴⁴ *Profile: 1988-89* (Clearwater: Pinellas County School Board, 1990); Charles U. Smith and Charles Grigg, "School Desegregation in Florida," in *The Civil Rights Movement in Florida and the United States: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* by Charles U. Smith (Tallahassee: Father & Son, 1989), 225; *St. Petersburg Times*, August 24, 1990.

⁴⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, October 23, 1972; *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, January 14, 1981.

⁴⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, August 30, 1981.