

## A LOOK BACK: The Sarasota school boycott

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The photo is from the May 6, 1969. edition of the Sarasota Journal concerning the desegregation of schools.

The full impact of the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka* had yet to be felt in Sarasota by 1957 and an impatient NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) requested that the Sarasota Board of Public Instruction immediately integrate Sarasota's school. The board continued to delay and in 1961, a lawsuit was filed in Federal Court. With the start of the 1962 school year, 29 black students enrolled in the formerly all-white Bay Haven Elementary School.

By 1965, a condition for the receipt of federal dollars by local school districts required school integration plans. Sarasota came up with a three-year plan to close the Booker schools and move the Amaryllis Park Elementary School building to the Southside Elementary School campus.

Clearly, the plan envisioned the accomplishment of school integration by moving black students to white schools. James Logan, a Riverview High School student and activist, voiced the opinion of many black students forced to attend formerly all-white schools when he stated, "We were going to a white school where nobody wanted us . "

The relocation of blacks to white campuses was the pattern school integration was taking all over the country. A widely read 1966 study, *The Coleman Report* concluded " . blacks would be better off attending white schools." For many, the most distressing part of Sarasota's plan was the deep sense of loss members of the Newton community felt who had attended these schools.

Closing the three schools also created a serious space problem. A decision to place the elementary schools on double sessions was rejected by both white and black parents. John Rivers sent the school board a resolution from the NAACP calling for a halt to the closing of the Booker schools and instead busing white students there. The board rejected the proposal and made plans to dismantle the Amaryllis Park Elementary school building and move it to Southside Elementary School campus at a cost of \$150,000.

On Saturday, May 3, 1969, Rivers conducted a meeting at the Newtown Community Center seeking a school boycott in protest of the closing of the Newtown schools. On Monday, May 5, 2,353 black students boycotted the Booker schools. To keep students learning, "Freedom Schools" were set up in local churches. James Logan was chosen as superintendent and New College students volunteered as teachers.

Dr. Thomas E. Guilford, superintendent of schools, called the boycott "irresponsible" and warned that the parents would be fined and put in jail for up to 90 days. After first refusing to negotiate with Newtown parents, the board reversed itself and agreed not to close the Booker schools and instead submit an amended desegregation plan to the Federal District Court.

A "parent committee" worked on several desegregation plans, but the Board of Public Instruction rejected them all. On July 28, the board voted to proceed with an amended desegregation plan, the only change being the retention of the Amaryllis Park School building.

Newtown parents were shocked. The Newtown Citizen Committee filed a lawsuit asking that the Federal District Court allow the Booker schools to be opened and integrated with white students. Federal District Judge Ben Krentzman turned the plan down, stating that it was too late to change plans for the current school year. Within hours, Assistant Superintendent Jerry Strickland submitted a desegregation plan, which included a voluntary mixed race student body. Strickland's plan was adopted by the Board of Public Instruction, and Booker Elementary, Bay Haven and Amaryllis Park were opened as magnet schools with voluntary integrated populations.

Today, Booker High and Booker Middle schools continue to operate as magnet schools with award winning programs and racially diverse student bodies. Bay Haven operates as Bay Haven School of Basics Plus.

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For additional information on this subject or another relating to Sarasota County's history, call 861-1180. The History Center is located at 701 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, FL 34236.