

1-1-1979

# Survival: A Case for Desegregating Lower Schools 18 While Retaining Black Colleges

James S. Tinney

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

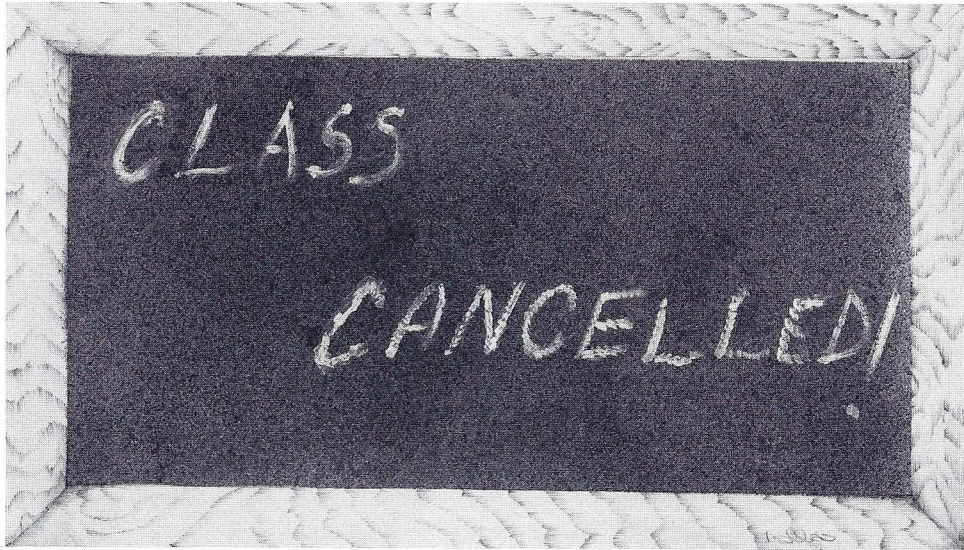
---

### Recommended Citation

Tinney, James S. (1979) "Survival: A Case for Desegregating Lower Schools 18 While Retaining Black Colleges," *New Directions*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol6/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact [lopez.matthews@howard.edu](mailto:lopez.matthews@howard.edu).



# **SURVIVAL**

**A CASE FOR  
DESEGREGATING  
LOWER SCHOOLS  
WHILE RETAINING  
BLACK COLLEGES**

By James S. Tinney

Black colleges and universities are not dying, but already certain morticians are preparing for their funerals. What is more, devious accomplices are insuring their demise by creating competitive white institutions in the same general locations as black schools, by merging black colleges into existant white universities, by eliminating duplicatory programs, and by offering incentives to swell white enrollment and staffing at traditionally black schools of higher education.

The examples of these foreboding maneuvers are too numerous to mention here.<sup>1</sup> However, just within the past few months such proposals have been announced for three additional schools—Langston University, Savannah State College, and Fort Valley State College—while action has begun to cut off more than \$100 million to Virginia for failure to pare duplications in course offerings at schools in Norfolk—which would have infused massive numbers of white students into Norfolk State College.

One does not have to impute a single motive to the designers of such threatening plans. Even where individuals promoting these developments may have lofty and idealistic notions not related to personal prejudice, the unpredictable responses of institutionalized racism may be expected to undermine these liberal intentions. Had this not been so, we would have already seen the effectualization of integrated elementary and secondary schools in the North, the economic growth of cities with Black mayors, a narrowed gap between white and Black income differentials in a time of general prosperity. In fact, we have witnessed quite the opposite.

In education, the tandem relations between a so-called "liberal" policy of HEW and the recalcitrant policies of Southern states are doomed to produce unexpected and undesired results. There is a sense in which the defensive and minimal responses of such states will militate against the survival of predominantly black public colleges as much as

the dismantling of dual state systems of higher education. "The dangers in this situation are considerable."<sup>2</sup>

Typically, the reactions of proponents of black colleges and universities have been rather defensive and related to protective concerns. The usual tact has been to compare white faculty and student representation at our colleges to Black representation at white ones. This demonstrates that black schools have always been more desegregated than white schools. Or the approach has been to compare financial resources of such institutions. In this case, black schools need strengthening rather than weakening; and they are more cost effective.

Others would alter the purpose of the black higher institution so that it will not have its legitimacy questioned or usurped by white schools. Thus we occasionally hear that the black college should be changed into an "urban" university, a "community service" institution or foster the development of some new instructional notion. While these sound good, they would still insure the demise of the black college as we now know it; they would divert scarce funds from academics to what have proven to be the most expensive kinds of operations;<sup>3</sup> and as innovations they would be even more vulnerable to negative assessments and cancellations.

Finally, supporters of black colleges question the national commitment to full equal opportunities for Blacks at all levels of higher education. (It is true that the elimination of racially identifiable schools leaves unanswered the questions relating to job losses, admissions criteria, representation on governance structures, financial aid, supportive teaching and counseling services, assured representation in more selective schools and disciplines, retention through graduation, and job placement and alumni services for Blacks.)

Such arguments may even be considered important by those favoring the dismantling of racially separate systems of higher education. Whether or not this is

so, these rebuttals are less than effective because they approach the problem from the wrong angle and argue a secondary rather than a primary case. Instead of comparing black colleges to white ones, a stronger rebuttal might compare black colleges to black elementary and secondary schools. For it is at this point that the current plans for desegregating colleges originated. By extension, white liberals have taken the philosophic arguments supporting the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. (Topeka, Ks.) Board of Education* and applied them to higher educational institutions as well. Thus the crux of the present debate revolves around consistent application to higher schools of a precedent legally determined upon lower schools.

The question, in the final analysis, is not about how well black colleges have performed their assigned tasks. Neither is it primarily about how well white colleges have educated Blacks and other minorities. The ultimate question, it appears, is whether or not the principle of desegregation shall apply to colleges and universities as it theoretically does to elementary and secondary schools. If supporters of black schools can successfully win the debate at this historical, judicial and philosophical level, then the current trend toward the dissolution of black institutions of higher learning will be dealt a fatal blow—at least in its present form.

Even if white colleges and universities were to become fully integrated at every level, educating and successfully graduating Black students without discrimination, there would still be reason to continue operating black colleges and universities. Furthermore, while desegregation of lower schools (i.e., elementary and secondary public schools) is necessary in order for America to live up to its democratic and constitutional ideals, there is still justification for supporting black institutions of higher learning within that framework.

In other words, a case can be made for

8 desegregating lower schools while retaining black colleges without admitting moral or legal ambivalence in these two approaches. A look at the historical, legal and judicial, and philosophical backgrounds of black lower schools, contrasted to those of black higher schools, hopefully will make the case clearer.

### Historical Difference

Historically, the origins of lower schools and higher schools in the Black community are different. Segregated black lower schools were created by whites and imposed against the will of Black people. Their purpose was to buttress a segregated social system and to insure racial inequality. Black colleges, however, were usually created during the Reconstruction period and thereby linked with the positive step toward racial equality known as emancipation.<sup>4</sup> And they were supported by Black communities as institutions of personal responsibility. Their purpose was not to confirm the social castes of Americanism, but to provide access to the mainstream society by remedying past deficiencies and equipping with socially-useful skills—thereby achieving social equality.

Not only were there differences in the origins of these schools, there were also distinctions in their historical development. Whites were not permitted to attend segregated black lower schools. But black colleges have always admitted white students. Further, at the lower level, attendance is mandatory; at the college level, it is voluntary. One is demanded by law; the other is a privilege or choice. Additionally, at the primary and secondary school levels, no option has been afforded to Black parents and their children. On the contrary, at the upper level, if one is otherwise "qualified," choice of the school itself is a matter of preference. Clearly then, the basis for both choice of school location and attendance is distinctly different for lower schools compared to higher ones.

The goals of such schools have historically been dissimilar also. Lower

schools have attempted to provide for general socialization by means of general or vocational education. Colleges, however, provide for a wider scope of learning, offering general, vocational, classical, and professional training. Primary and secondary schools operate on the assumption that the state has a responsibility to provide a minimal level of learning for all; whereas colleges (except those with open admissions) do not guarantee minimal level of education for everyone.

There are also clearly distinct differences in this historical sources of support and control of educational institutions at the various levels. Lower schools have traditionally relied upon local funding (usually from property taxes) for maintenance and support. Control over such institutions of learning has also been at the local level. On the other hand, colleges and universities (except sometimes junior colleges) have been funded and controlled at the state level.

Equally significant is the fact that no agencies have been developed or supported to preserve public all-black segregated lower schools. Yet at least nine national agencies exist to channel support for the sustenance of black colleges.<sup>5</sup>

Where desegregation of lower schools has occurred (conditioned by climates relatively free of violence, by relatively stable populations not tending toward reverse resegregation, and by exposure to both race and class pluralism), it has resulted in improved educational attainment for many.<sup>6</sup> However, where desegregation of traditionally black colleges has occurred, positive changes in educational attainment have not been documented. In fact, desegregation of black colleges has often led to increasing white percentages without increasing overall enrollment (thus actually decreasing the number of educated Blacks). Corollary increases in Black enrollments at nearby white universities have not occurred either; and in some instances, formerly black institutions are phased out altogether, resulting

in fewer opportunities for education for Black students as well as whites.<sup>7</sup>

There is thus little historical basis for placing segregated black elementary and secondary schools in the same category as traditionally black colleges and universities. Historically, their origins, development, stated goals, sources of support and control—and even attempted desegregation—demonstrate dissimilar and often contradictory characteristics.

### The Judicial Argument

Judicially and legally, one may also build a separate argument against segregated lower schools while finding a rationale for maintaining identifiably black colleges and universities. In fact, the legal disposition of these questions is signalized in two different cases more than 15 years apart. These were the *Brown* decision, already cited, and the 1970 case of *Adams vs. Richardson*. Plaintiffs in the latter case charged that HEW was continuing to provide financial assistance to public school systems, especially public colleges, while in violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which obligated HEW to "withhold federal funds from public colleges and universities which segregate and discriminate on the grounds of race."<sup>8</sup> In 1972, Judge John H. Pratt of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia concluded that the "complex problem of system-wide racial imbalance" and the "problem of integrating higher education must be dealt with on a state-wide basis." The dismantling of identifiably black colleges ensued as a part of attempts by states to comply with that decision. In addition to such dismantling, the offering of incentives to whites to attend Black schools has increased the options of white students who otherwise would never have considered attending black colleges. At Langston [Oklahoma] University, for instance, 100 scholarships will be given to white students. But this has not similarly increased the options for Black students who otherwise would not attend white universities. It has, in reality, limited them.

To a large degree, the differences be-

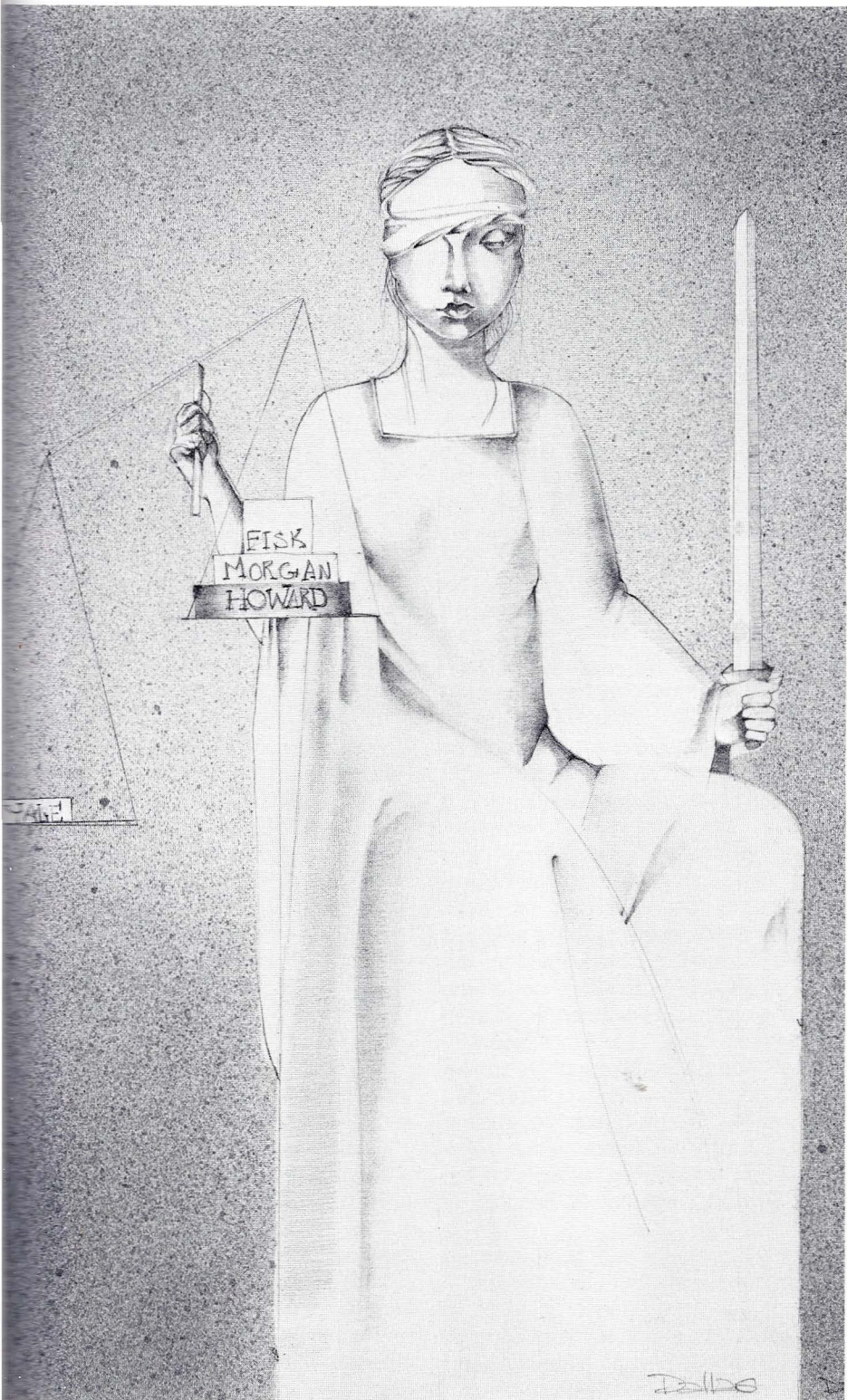


ILLUSTRATION BY LINDA DALLAS

10 tween the 1954 *Brown* decision and the 1972 *Adams* decision illustrate the very differences between lower and higher education with which we are concerned. It does not follow, one might argue, that elimination or dilution of black colleges is necessary for satisfying the court's decree that unitary "state systems" of education replace "dual systems." But HEW was largely left to itself to determine its own guidelines—in this regard, evaluating states' compliance. These guidelines, unfortunately, do not apply across-the-board to all states. While HEW has formally interpreted its mission to include strengthening existing black colleges, in actual practice, its decisions have had the effect of threatening their existence.

It is quite an anomaly that the *Brown* and *Adams* decisions were based on nearly 20 years of prior court decisions admitting Black students to various state universities (usually graduate or professional programs).<sup>9</sup> Even more ironic is the fact that the courts saw no discrepancy in opening up the Missouri University School of Journalism to Blacks in 1940, while at the same time continuing support of a newly-formed School of Journalism at the then-black Lincoln University scarcely 30 miles away.<sup>10</sup> Neither the *Brown* nor the *Adams* decision, while admitting Blacks to white schools, attempted to alter the constituency of black colleges.

There are other differences. The *Brown* decision is a frontal attack on *de jure* segregation in lower public schools, but it has had almost no effect on *de facto* segregation, particularly in urban areas in the North. In fact, additional court cases concerned with *de facto* segregation of lower schools in the North have had the opposite effect; intended remedies have furthered white flight to other districts and caused increased racial isolation. At the upper level, colleges and universities are—today—guilty of *de facto* segregation rather than *de jure*. Yet because higher educational institutions have no captive constituencies, no natural enforced boundaries and no guarantees of student utilization, even the remedies ap-

plied to lower schools guilty of *de facto* segregation do not apply with force to colleges and universities.<sup>11</sup>

Further contrasts become apparent when one looks at the membership of lower public schools and that of higher schools. Whereas the Black percentages of inner-city school districts are increasing, the same does not hold true for black colleges. Not only has there been a decline in the enrollment of Blacks in public-supported colleges, there has also been a decline in the total Black population of nearly half of the 20 states in which the majority of the black colleges are located.<sup>12</sup>

Legally it is difficult, and in some cases impossible, to deal with higher education in the same way as lower education. Public elementary and secondary schools are organized in pyramid fashion with centralized authority at district levels. Yet higher education is not so centralized. It includes a mixture of both private and public colleges and universities (and some private institutions supported largely with public funds). The "dispersal of authority at the state level prevents an efficient unified response to federal requirements even if there is agreement on goals."<sup>13</sup>

This distinction between lower and higher institutions of learning is also demonstrated as one examines the track record of cases involving aid to religious schools. Support to colleges and universities sponsored by religious denominations has continued unabated, while even the remotest kinds of aid to elementary and secondary parochial schools are denied or become the subject of extended legal battles. This suggests yet another precedent for interpreting the law differently when considering schools at the lower level, compared to schools of higher learning.

Clearly then, in terms of separate court decisions made at protracted intervals, in terms of legal precedence, in terms of legal structures, and in terms of boundaries and membership, there are legal and judicial reasons for clearly differentiating

between lower and higher educational litigation and compliance.

### The Philosophical Issue

In a philosophical sense, the rationale for separating lower from higher education has long been discussed. Partly this is related to the theories of child development. The child, it is said, has little control over his or her self-development and should not be expected nor given the responsibility of deciding what kind of an education he or she will receive. In fact, it is extremely important, in the early formative years, that the pupil's educational environment be planned so that wholesome attitudes are instilled through democratic social relations—including company with children of various classes, races, and backgrounds.

On the contrary, the college student must assume control over his or her life and decision-making regarding his or her education. The white student does not need the option of attending an all-white school at this stage since white culture and identity have not been threatened in a society where whites compose the dominant majority. Even so, if the white student desires to attend a predominantly-white institution, the student usually has the material advantages and other means whereby the white student can travel to attend some college in a distant geographical location. If black colleges are destroyed, however, or if the only remaining ones are private (more expensive) then thousands of Black students will be denied that equivalent option.

There are also clear differences between the segregated black lower school and the historically black college. The former was created to perpetuate disadvantage; the black college has always remediated it. The segregated public school is by design racially exclusive, but the black college has almost always been racially inclusive while retaining its identity. (In fact, proportionately twice as many whites as Blacks are enrolled in public colleges. If a serious attempt were made to remedy discriminatory practices of

public colleges of all kinds, it would of necessity require increasing Black enrollment at all public colleges.)<sup>14</sup>

Finally, another look at the parallel offered by the fact of religious schools offers another philosophical indication that racially separate schools at the lower level are undemocratic, while higher education has often fostered schools separated on lines of academic discipline, professional training, or religion. Separate religious schools for primary and secondary pupils are largely to be found among German immigrants and their descendants in the Lutheran churches, to Eastern European immigrants and descendants in Catholic churches, and to the Seventh-Day Adventists. At one time, Presbyterians operated the most extensive parochial school system in this country, but that was abolished because—among other reasons—it was believed to be contrary to the democratic ideal and to the concept of free public education for all.

The parallel which this suggests between parochial and racially-identifiable schools is more than coincidental. As Catholic schools have become black, they too have been closed. As public schools in the South became integrated, private white segregationist academies were formed. Everywhere there are examples (such as these) which point to an unstated awareness that separate lower schools are non-American by tradition and owe their inspiration to religion or ideology. But seldom—one could almost say never—has the public consciousness or conscience viewed higher schools (whether predominantly religious or racial or political) as contradictory to the free public school concept or to an open society.

In conclusion, there is strong reason for commitment to both desegregated elementary and secondary schools, and to black colleges and universities. Acceptance of one does not necessarily imply or demand rejection of the other. □

#### REFERENCES

1. James E. Lyons, "The Educational Future of Black Americans," *New National Black Monitor* (June 1976), p. 11.
2. *Small Change: A Report on Federal Support for Black Colleges* (Atlanta: Southern Educational Foundation, 1972), p. 82.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
4. King V. Cheek, "Black Colleges in the Era of America's Second Reconstruction," *National Black Monitor* (October 1974), p. 5.
5. Examples include: Institute for Services to Education, Moton Memorial Institute, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, Office for Advancement of Public Negro Colleges, Phelps-Stokes Fund, United Board for College Development, United Negro College Fund, University Associates, and TACTICS.
6. While James Coleman has recently repudiated his earlier findings, he has offered no evidence of newer research to support his changed attitude. Even omitting the conditions I have included, the revised Coleman attitude still admits that desegregation provides less educational achievement for none, and possibilities of better attainment for some.
7. The number of black colleges is fewer today than in past years.
8. The *Adams vs. Richardson* case was cited as *Adams vs. Weinberger* in the Court of Appeals. See *Ending Discrimination in Higher Education* (Atlanta: Southern Educational Foundation, 1974) p. 7.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 1,2.
10. The establishment of the first black journalism school at Lincoln University in Missouri, and the admission of Blacks to the University of Missouri School of Journalism were both the result of a court suit, *Bluford vs. Canada*. Lucile Bluford is today editor of the *Kansas City Call*.
11. Conrad K. Harper, "The Legal Status of the Black College," *Daedalus* (Summer, 1971), p. 778.
12. Mary Carter Williams, *Profile of Enrollment in the Historical Black Colleges* (Washington: Institute for Services to Education, 1978), p. 12.
13. Solomon Arbeiter, "Public College Desegregation: The Challenge is Still There," *Compact* (September, 1974), pp. 5, 7.
14. *Profile, op. cit.*, p. 25.