

STATEMENT TO THE BOSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE JUNE 11, 1963

Madame Chairman, Members of the Boston School Committee

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is an organization dedicated to the elimination of discrimination and prejudice from all phases of American life. Our goal is First Class Citizenship, and we will settle for nothing less. All immigrants to the American shores have suffered from discrimination, but in most cases, as soon as they lost their identifying accents, they were able to blend into the American culture and enjoy the fruits of our democratic system. The Negro brought here in chains, bears visible identification of his race and we have spent our lives tearing down the wall after wall of resistance raised in our path, because of our color.

One of the most frustrating and devastating obstacles confronting us, is the lack of educational opportunity. Education constitutes our strongest hope for pulling ourselves out of the inferior status to which society has assigned us. A boy of eight or nine years, who is receiving an inferior education today, will feel the effects at age thirty-five, forty-five and until he dies, as he struggles as a father to rear his children. His lack of educational opportunity will make it impossible for him to motivate his children properly and thus, this burden is inherited by each succeeding generation. Since, you, our School Committee, are the caretakers of our educational school system, a job which each of you sought voluntarily, we are here tonight to express our dissatisfaction, to air our complaints and to make certain demands in connection with our schools.

I know that the word demand is a word that is disliked by many public officials, but I am afraid that it is too late for pleading, begging, requesting, or even reasoning. The NAACP'S concern with the plight of Negro pupils in the Boston Schools is of long duration. Please allow me a few minutes to review. Several years ago, because of many complaints of a varying nature from parents, I received permission from the then superintendent, Dr. Haley, to visit and interview certain principals. I interviewed six principals of predominantly Negro Schools. Three of these principals refused to acknowledge the existence of any problems. They tossed off the complaints parents had made and, in general, inferred that the NAACP was making a "mountain out of a molehill". One principal acknowledged that it could be true that his graduates, 99% Negro, might have difficulty in high school when competing with students from all over Boston, because he stated "Negroes do not make their kids learn". He said further that we should be like Jewish parents, and see that our children learn." Another principal told me that she just didn't think that Negroes could learn at the same rate at which white children could learn. She had just left a school in Roslindale which was an all white school, and felt that she could come to this conclusion. Another principal very pleasant and affable, said that he saw no differences in children, and that he was sure that his attitude was reflected in his staff. Time has proven that his rather nonchalant attitude did not produce the results desired by the complaining parents.

On June 30, 1961, the NAACP was represented at a meeting at the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. This meeting was called to determine the allocation of Negro students within the Boston School System. At that time the Commission was asked to make a survey which would demonstrate the characteristics of schools being used, to make a comparison of teaching standards, a comparison with census tracts to determine if school population was more segregated than the district in which they were located. They were also asked to examine the transfer systems, and to make population surveys by grades, schools and districts.

On October 2, 1961, the NAACP was represented at another meeting held at the Commission Office. Field Secretary Quimby reported on conferences with Dr. Gillis on July 5th and August 1st. In both conferences, he stated that there were no figures available concerning race or religion of pupils in the schools, thus he could not answer directly as to whether or not de facto segregation existed in his school system.

Shortly after this meeting, I, then a member of Atty. General Edward McCormack's Advisory Committee on Civil Rights, brought this problem to the attention of this body where it was discussed at length. As a result, Atty. General McCormack and Assistant Atty. General Gerald Berlin met with Dr. Gillis on the advisability of conducting a color census of the Boston Schools so that complaints being made could be assessed intelligently. Dr. Gillis subsequently was invited to attend a full meeting of the Atty. General's Advisory Committee on Civil Rights. In my opinion, as a member of that Committee, Dr. Gillis did not see de facto segregation as an issue to be dealt with by the Boston School Administration.

In March 1962, the Education Committee of the Boston Branch, NAACP met with Dr. Gillis. This meeting was not only disappointing, but frustrating as here again, we were unable to get the superintendent to see this issue of de facto segregation and its ramifications as a growing and destructive evil within our school system. This brief report of events brings us up to this public hearing tonight. We are here because the clamor from the community is too anxious to be ignored, the dissatisfaction and complaints too genuine and deep seated to be passed over lightly, and the injustices present in our school system hurt our pride, rob us of our dignity and produce results which are injurious not only to our future, but to that of our city, our commonwealth and our nation.

Paul Parks, a member of the Education Committee of the NAACP, has produced certain facts that call for serious attention. Mr Park's research brings out that there are 13 schools in Boston predominantly of Negro population. The youngest of these buildings was built in 1937. The rest in 1932, 1912, 1910, 1909, 1922, 1906, 1900, 1870 and 1868. According to the Sargent's Report of May 1962, at least four of the building have been recommended to be abandoned because of health and safety reasons Eight have been recommended to be renovated in order to meet present educational requirements.

We then make this charge....There is segregation in fact in our Boston Public School System. To be sure, the May 17, 1954 Supreme Court decision dealt with deliberate segregation, but there can be no misinterpretation of the language used in that decision which stated that the "separation of children solely on the basis of race generates a feeling of inferiority that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone". The 1960 census showed a total Negro population of 112,000. 63,000 of that total live in Boston and 57,000 live in the Roxbury-Dorchester section of Boston. Our school population as of last Spring was 93,000 and of that approximately 14,000 are Negroes.

The NAACP'S position on Northern School segregation is clear; we must work to reduce and eliminate school segregation wherever it exists. In the discussion of segregation in fact in our public schools, we do not accept residential segregation as an excuse for countenancing this situation. We feel that it is the responsibility of school officials to take an affirmative and positive stand on the side of the best possible education for all children. This "best possible education" is not possible where segregation exists. Inadequate educational standards, unequal facilities and discriminatory educational practices exist wherever there is school segregation.

Therefore, we state that it is imperative that the Boston School Committee take immediate steps to eliminate in toto segregation from our school system. We recognize that some of the methods advised pose problems when related to younger children, therefore, we recommend that the immediate concentration be focused on our Junior High Schools. There should be a review of the Open Enrollment plan which would allow transfers without the present limitations. This plan should be accompanied by rezoning designed deliberately to integrate our schools. Site selections and additions to existing school buildings must be planned to achieve integration. Segregation in fact is a problem existing in all urban communities today. This problem must be acknowledged and faced up to by all citizens and public officials.

School segregation, based upon residential ghettos has been under increased attack in the United States courts. The Taylor vs. New Rochelle Board of Education decision in 1961 held that de facto segregation was unconstitutional in the case where there was a clear intent on the part of a school board to use residential segregation as a means to maintain segregated schools by gerrymander.

In Hempstead, N.Y. the Federal Court denied the Hempstead Board of Education's request for dismissal and stated that de facto segregation should be examined by the court even though there was no

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clear intent on the part of the school officials to create segregation.

In the Webb vs. Chicago Board of Education case, the judge granted the Chicago Board of Education's petition to dismiss this case. However, the judge felt compelled to comment on the nature and affect of segregated education in Chicago.

Last Friday in California, President Kennedy called the attention of the nation to the presence of de facto segregation in our Northern cities and urged that we seek methods to insure that all American children receive the best education available.

The unjust conditions created by segregation should also come under our scrutiny tonight. There are many conditions that must be corrected as we move forward to give to Negro students what rightfully belongs to them.

We are indebted to the many known and unknown dedicated principals and teachers who have seen their duty clearly and have performed in the true spirit of their profession. We acknowledge and honor their presence in our system. However, too many others approach the Negro schools with their minds poisoned by stereotyped, preconceived notions of Negro people. They believe that Negroes are lazy, stupid and inferior. This attitude does not go unnoticed by the youngest Negro child...for at an early age our youngsters become skilled in their ability to recognize prejudice. This recognition is always accompanied by resentment, hostility and a feeling of humiliation. This is an unhealthy situation which cannot create an atmosphere in which the teacher is at his or her best, or where the child can perform at his highest level. We realize that teachers in these schools do teach under difficult conditions and these conditions should be remedied in order to encourage teachers not only to remain in these districts, but to improve the quality of their teaching. Training programs should be expanded to establish a liaison between the school administration and colleges from which we get our teachers so that they can start their teaching careers able to distinguish myth from reality. Such a program should create an understanding of the child in congested Negro school districts which would be an invaluable aid to wellmeaning teachers who want to do a good job wherever they are assigned.

We also urge that permanent teachers be assigned to grades 1-3 and that the size of these classes be reduced to 25. I know that it is not necessary to stress the importance of a good beginning. Our teachers should have at their disposal sufficient supplies...books and other materials.

We should use books and other visual aids that include illustrations of people of all races. To use material depicting only white people is unrealistic in today's world. Please do not minimize the importance of this statement. It is important that the Negro child see recognition of himself as a person of worth and it is important that the white child see people of other races in a positive setting. This material is available and is being used in other school systems.

The statement often made by school officials to refute charges of discrimination - that we have a uniform curriculum - concerns thoughtful people. We know that needs vary from district to district. We know that many of our predominantly Negro schools are located in the older, underprivileged sections of Boston. We acknowledge that many of our children come from deprived homes. Many of our parents, handicapped by lack of training or formal education, are consumed with the day to day struggle of just trying to make ends meet. For many reasons that go hand in hand with deprivation, inadequate and dilapidated overcrowded housing, discrimination, bitterness and frustration, our schools must consider the plight of the pupil in these congested Negro areas. As a good teacher gears her program to the individual child, the school administration must have concentrated developmental reading programs in these schools in grades should be expanded and taught by qualified specially trained teachers. The needs of the average child in this setting must not be overlooked. The curriculum must be enriched to enable this child to compete in a society where the removal of the barriers of segregation will force them to compete with those who have not been handicapped as they have been.

Because ghetto living produces children with problems, we cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of the school adjustment counselors and the

need for more such counselors.

The vocational program should be expanded to include grades 7 and Negro children should be counselled by people who believe that America is the land of opportunity for all. To steer Negro students into certain trades or into certain training programs because the counselor believes other programs out of their reach is unfair, and this happens often in our schools. We are disturbed by the small number of our youngsters who take advantage of the cooperative programs. This we feel is the result of poor guidance programs, and the fact that many are discouraged from attending schools outside of their assigned school districts. This discouraging of students in the Industrial Arts courses prohibits them from gaining an entry into union and apprenticeship programs. We should see that all students, Negro and White, have the opportunity during specially observed weeks and in assemblies, to hear and see people of all races who have achieved in many fields. The value of this type of learning experience cannot be over emphasized and should be planned. This is something that can be accomplished without affecting our school budget and the dividends are great.

We feel that there should be no discrimination in the hiring or assigning of teachers. We take note of the fact that there is no Negro school principal in our system and ask you to examine the reasons for this.

We recommend that you accept in toto the section of the Sargent Report that refers to Roxbury and North Dorchester. This portion of the survey we feel, will achieve maximum integration in this section of Boston.

We also urge that you review the system of intelligence testing in our schools. The Boston School System mainly uses a group test to determine the intelligence and capability of a child to learn. When we realize that many of the Negro children coming to Boston are from rural communities, we feel that a group test is unfair and does not give a true picture of ability. As a result of this kind of testing, many Negro children are declared slow learners and unteachable.

We are aware of the problems confronting this school administration. We, like any citizens, are vitally concerned with good sound educational policies. Our demands tonight have centered around de facto segregation and its evil effects because we know that this issue has not been faced by Boston school officials. This issue must be dealt with, if we are to move along with the plans and blueprints that proclaim a New Boston.

In the selection of a new superintendent, we see an opportunity to tackle a problem that is facing every major Northern city today. We regret that you chose to reject the proposal of the committee to aid in your selection, but we are encouraged by Dr. Hunt's role as consultant. In all frankness, we must say that we have seen no one with the present school administration who had demonstrated knowledge or ability to help in this problem. We feel strongly that the school committee should not limit itself to any section of this nation in its quest for the right person to fill this position. We do not believe that this man has to be a superman as indicated by a writer recently. We do believe, however, that he must be a person experienced in dealing with the problems of an urban community, who is sensitive to the needs of minority groups, who sees the community as an ally, and who is morally committed to the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

We demand the right to discuss this selection in detail with Dr. Hunt and we demand that every applicant be examined thoroughly in regard to his background in the area of human relations. It might seem that we have placed the entire responsibility for the solving of these problems on your shoulders. Let me say that the community is also concerned and stands ready to work along with you. The school administration and the community must join forces to erase the faulty image they have of each other and work together if we are to be successful. You might question the ability of the community to rise to the occasion, and I answer that just as we rise to the occasion to pay our taxes (for which we get small return)...we will rise to the occasion to see that our children are no longer shortchanged in the education they receive.

Ruth Batson, Chairman, Education Committee  
NAACP, Boston Branch

Elizabeth Price, Barbara Elam, Erna Ballantyne, Melvin King, Paul Parks