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**Challenges and Impact:
Federal Initiatives in Desegregating Rural Mississippi Schools during the Great Society**

*Audrey Landis*¹

“Every knowledgeable Mississippi segregationist looks to the future with foreboding. He knows, in short, that the time is fast running out when the country will tolerate this enclave of feudalism within the United States and that his only choice is to make the inevitable transition peaceable or bloody,” wrote James W. Silver, a history professor at the University of Mississippi on 19 July 1964.² Forty-three days later, on August 31, twenty federal marshals and eighteen hundred members of the Mississippi National Guard prepared to be mobilized as twenty-one Black students enrolled in four all-white elementary schools in Biloxi, Mississippi. Three hours away, in rural Leake County, just one Black girl, six-year-old Deborah Lewis, enrolled in an all-white elementary school under similar rigid security. Eight other students had been scheduled to enter that elementary school, but dropped out after their parents had been pressured by white community leaders.³ Tragically, the 1964 attempts at desegregation were not the first significant attempt at closing the educational divide in Mississippi, nor would they be the last. The process of school desegregation in the state was long, bloody, and ultimately failed the hundreds of thousands of Black students who, for years after *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, KS*, received a secondary quality education at the hands of segregationists, whether they be community members or government officials.

In 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson launched his Great Society policy agenda, a set of ambitious domestic programs and reforms aimed at tackling poverty, promoting civil rights, and enhancing the overall well-being of the American people, especially rural and urban populations. With the support of federal funds through policies such as the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as well as unprecedented regulation in state education, he aimed to finally make real progress towards desegregation in states such as Mississippi, which had not budged an inch since *Brown*.⁴

¹ Audrey Landis graduated from University of California, Santa Barbara with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History of Public Policy and Law in 2024.

² James W. Silver, “Mississippi Must Choose,” *New York Times*, (1923-), 19 July 1964. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/mississippi-must-choose/docview/115842974/se-2>.

³ John Herbers, “Rural School In Mississippi Enrolls One Negro Girl Under Heavy Guard,” *New York Times*, 2 September 1964.

⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks at the University of Michigan Online, 1964, by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/239689>.

While an understudied field, rural education presents an opportunity for scholars to gain insights into the unique struggles, resource disparities, and educational barriers encountered by rural communities, shedding light on crucial areas for policy interventions and equitable educational advancements in these often-neglected regions. *The Reality of Rural Education*, a 1954 study by M.L. Cushman, describes the primary issues with rural education in the 1950s being a difficulty to recruit and maintain qualified teachers, a lack of vocational training unique to agrarian populations, and the unique and vital position within rural communities that schools occupied as a community center.⁵ Neglecting these schools means depriving these communities of essential gathering spaces, but improving them makes it possible to improve the lives of millions of Americans.

My research examines to what extent and how the federal policy of the 1960s, which comprised President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society agenda, especially the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, contributed to creating more equitable education. I focused on its impact on the process of desegregation in rural Mississippi schools with the goal of better understanding the federal government's role in ensuring equitable education. Building on the critical work of other historians in this field, especially the work of Charles Bolton, I found that the legislation and federal funds of the 1960s were misguided, misused, and ultimately did not achieve their intended purposes because of bureaucratic oversight in Washington, D.C. and Jackson, Mississippi. By hiring more staff to facilitate these programs at the federal level, not delegating responsibility to state governments, and with tighter regulations to ensure their appropriate use, the federal government likely could have prevented some of these discrepancies. Ultimately, however, the legacy of segregation is so entrenched in this state that no amount of federal oversight could have anticipated the lengths that some would take to avoid integration, including a white-flight to private academies as the federal government began to act on integration.

To understand why desegregation of public schools took so long in Mississippi requires a step back to 1954 to better understand systematic barriers and discover why *Brown v. Board of Education* and its follow-up case, *Brown II*, failed to achieve their ends. *Brown*, despite its unanimous, landmark declaration that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," did not provide any way for the court or federal officials to actually enforce desegregation.⁶ *Brown II*, the follow-up case which came a year later and was meant to deliver desegregation guidelines, established the vague timeline that schools would desegregate "with all deliberate speed," but failed to provide concrete guidelines, encouraging local solutions and lower courts to enforce the ruling.⁷ This delegation to local powers is a consistent thread throughout federal desegregation policy and a huge opportunity for discrepancies to

⁵ M. L. Cushman, "The Reality of Rural Education," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 36, no. 1 (1954): pp. 4–6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20332496>.

⁶ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

⁷ *Brown II*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955)

form. As the next decade would show, the white politicians and administrators who controlled education in Mississippi were outwardly committed to maintaining legal segregation.

Gary Orfield highlights the primary issue with the court system attempting to direct a total overhaul of the public school system in *The Reconstruction of Southern Education*: “an order from the insulated precincts of a court directing a profound restructuring of the central public institution in the local community inevitably produced a contest between local strength and national authority within the political system.”⁸ White Mississippians would always see the issue of school desegregation as an overstepping of federal power from the North, reminiscent of the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era. It was not just about schools; it was a struggle for dominance between federal intervention and local sovereignty, a battle to maintain what was left of the Antebellum South.

As Governor Hugh White claimed shortly after *Brown*, white Mississippians would “resist [integration]...by every legal means at our command.” State-supported attempts at creating policy loopholes to resist the decision came in two main forms: a half-hearted attempt at equalizing the separate schools system and, later, a constitutional amendment that would make it possible to close all of the public schools in a given district and reopen them as publicly funded private schools if desegregation began to occur.⁹

The state of Mississippi had been half-heartedly promoting an agenda of equalization between Black and white schools since the 1940s, and shortly after the *Brown* decision, Black leaders were invited to a meeting with Governor White and his all-white Legal Education Advisory Committee (LEAC) to gauge public opinion about continuing equalization past 1954. The LEAC had been formed earlier in the year with the stated purpose of preserving “the best interest of both races and the public welfare [by] maintaining separate educational facilities for white and colored races.”¹⁰ Black leaders, including NAACP personnel and educators, presented their unified front to the Governor, entitled the Jackson Declaration. This document declared their support of the *Brown* decision and prioritized every student in Mississippi being able to attend the school closest to their home.¹¹ This was

⁸ Gary Orfield, *The Reconstruction of Southern Education: The Schools and the 1964 Civil Rights Act*, (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1969), p. 2.

⁹ “New Factor of Desegregation Entering School Picture for 1954-55: SEGREGATION BATTLE ON IN MISSISSIPPI Governor White Urges Action to Abolish Public Schools.” *The Sun (1837-)*, 8 September 1954.
<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-factor-desegregation-entering-school-picture/ocview/541600501/se-2>.

¹⁰ Natalie G. Adams, “Just Trying to Have School: The Struggle for Desegregation in Mississippi,” (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), p. 13.

¹¹ Charles C. Bolton, “The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980,” (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 63.

a comparatively minor ask and likely would have resulted in little desegregation because neighborhoods were largely segregated during this period. Governor White and the LEAC dismissed their opinions and moved forward with equalization, remaining defiant and insistent on maintaining a dual system.

Although the equalization project was treated somewhat more seriously than before *Brown*, it still did not entirely address the issue that separate schools could never be truly equal. Between July 1957 and 1959, 399 new building projects received state funds, and 55% of those undertakings involved Black schools. There were some improvements in the area of salary equalization between Black and white teachers, better school transportation was offered, and some unconsolidated one-room Black schools were eliminated.¹² From 1952 to 1957, there was a 563% increase in funding for Black libraries, in contrast to a mere 54% increase for white libraries.¹³ However, improvements were limited, and a 1962 unreleased state Department of Education report found that school districts, on average, spent \$4 on every white child for every \$1 spent on Black children in local instruction funds. This disparity was exacerbated in rural areas, as highlighted by the rural Amite County, which spent thirty-five times more on white than Black students. Over half of the state's Black schools in 1962 were unaccredited, even by the relatively lax standard of Mississippi, because of abnormal teaching loads and poor facilities, including empty libraries.¹⁴

In 1958, only 9% of white schools but 62% of Black schools were still unconsolidated one, two, or three-teacher schools.¹⁵ Consolidation is an issue unique to rural schools and one that the state of Mississippi had tackled in white schools during the early twentieth century. Consolidating small country schools into larger facilities, complete with extracurricular activities and more advanced academic offerings, allowed the two disparate ends of Mississippi's rural white communities, the planter class and small farmers, to be brought together and worsened social divides between poor white and poor Black people.¹⁶

The second loophole that state officials attempted to use to circumvent desegregation was a state constitutional amendment that would allow the abolition of public schools and their reopening as publicly supported private schools in any district where segregated schooling was threatened. This piece of "last-ditch legal warfare," as described by the *Baltimore Sun*, was intended to be held as a threat over the heads of Black desegregation advocates. While the details of how this plan would occur were

¹² Bolton, "The Hardest Deal of All," p. 77.

¹³ Adams, "Just Trying to Have School," p. 14.

¹⁴ Bolton, "The Hardest Deal of All," p. 88.

¹⁵ Bolton, "The Hardest Deal of All," p. 89.

¹⁶ Jennifer V. Opager Baughn, "A Modern School Plant: Rural Consolidated Schools in Mississippi, 1910–1955." *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 19, no. 1 (2012): pp. 43–72. <https://doi.org/10.5749/buildand.19.1.0043>.

never worked out in full, the amendment was ratified by a 2:1 margin.¹⁷ Although many white Mississippians were skeptical of the idea, the final tally of the vote showed that Mississippi's political leadership was almost unanimous in their endorsement.¹⁸ Alongside the constitutional amendment, Governor White proposed two more bills to the legislature that would promote segregation: one that would require all legal counsel who filed suit to be cleared by the State Bar Association of Mississippi and another that would prevent the agitation of lawsuits by outsiders. This would ultimately limit the amount of desegregation challenges that the NAACP could bring against the state.¹⁹

Black education advocates, parents, and families who criticized the separate school system experienced private and state-sanctioned economic violence, as well as physical intimidation, leading to a difficult and somewhat sparse resistance.²⁰ Anti-integration (white) Citizens Councils were formed in the Black-majority Delta Region in 1954 to limit desegregation.²¹ The Mississippi state legislature passed a measure that required all teachers to list their organizational memberships on an affidavit, attempting to uncover the teachers who belonged to the NAACP. Some school officials required Black teachers to remove their names from voting rolls to have their contracts renewed.²² When the NAACP branch of Walthall, a small, white-majority village, submitted a school desegregation petition in August 1954, school officials responded by closing the district's only Black school for fourteen days and firing a bus driver who had signed the petition.²³

By 1963, the median performance of Southern white students generally was from one to four years higher than that of Black students in reading, mathematics, and cumulative school achievement, as Emma Bragg wrote in the *Journal of Negro Education*.²⁴ She found that in the North, formerly segregated students who were integrated later in their academic careers developed much more rapidly once integrated. A separate study, done specifically on Southern rural children in Virginia, found that poor school environments, which include segregated schools, were potentially as damaging to

¹⁷ "New Factor of Desegregation Entering School Picture for 1954-55," *The Sun*.

¹⁸ Bolton, "The Hardest Deal of All," p. 72.

¹⁹ "New Factor of Desegregation Entering School Picture for 1954-55," *The Sun*.

²⁰ Bolton, "The Hardest Deal of All," p. 65.

²¹ John E. Rousseau, "EXPOSE--White Citizens Councils' Hate Crusade: Part II," *Pittsburgh Courier* (1955-1966), 25 August 1956, City Edition.

<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/expose-white-citizens-councils-hate-crusade/docview/202351645/se-2>.

²² Bolton, "The Hardest Deal of All," p. 84.

²³ Bolton, "The Hardest Deal of All," p. 67.

²⁴ Emma W. Bragg, "Changes and Challenges in the '60's," *The Journal of Negro Education* 32:1 (1963): pp. 25–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2294488>.

educational attainment as not attending school entirely.²⁵ Desegregation, if supported by the federal government and with adequate support systems, could close educational attainment gaps. Racial disparities in education were compounded in rural areas, where many Black students still attended unconsolidated schools and faced higher poverty rates than their urban counterparts.

Before 1964, the federal government had generally been uninterested in regulating education and instead left it up to state and local governments, despite sending significant amounts of aid to Southern states (up to \$300 million) for education and “impacted areas” programs.²⁶ School administrators in the early 1960s saw the national educational system as fifty separate parts, believing that the Office of Education should have nothing to do with local schools. They dealt only with state governments, providing advice only on request.²⁷ In 1961, President John F. Kennedy helped defeat a Senate amendment to an education bill that would withhold federal funds from the districts that had not made an effort towards desegregation. His administration would later switch course in 1962 when the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) Secretary suggested that the federal government explore cutting off federal-impact funds and consider the possibility of filing school desegregation lawsuits against districts that remained segregated.²⁸ Nothing came of this bill.

Only five days after assuming the presidency in 1963, President Johnson signaled that Civil Rights would be a significant aspect of his agenda by calling on Congress to pass the civil rights bill that would become the 1964 Civil Rights Act (CRA).²⁹ Title VI prohibited discrimination in “any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance,” but failed to immediately make an impact towards desegregation.³⁰ School districts were required to draw up voluntary plans for desegregation compliant with HEW guidelines, but the instructions and regulations were “at best sketchy and at worst so vague as to render them absolutely meaningless and ineffective,” according to a 1965 report by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).³¹ Three kinds of voluntary desegregation plans were accepted: “Freedom of Choice” plans, plans creating geographic attendance areas, or a

²⁵ Robert L. Green, and Louis J. Hofmann, “A Case Study of the Effects of Educational Deprivation on Southern Rural Negro Children,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 34: 3 (1965): pp. 327–41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2294204>.

²⁶ Crystal R. Sanders, “‘Money Talks’: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and the African-American Freedom Struggle in Mississippi,” *History of Education Quarterly* 56: 2 (2016): pp. 361–67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26356306>.

²⁷ Gary Orfield, *The Reconstruction of Southern Education*, p.50.

²⁸ Bolton, “The Hardest Deal of All,” p. 92.

²⁹ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, (New York City, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 787.

³⁰ Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, 78 Stat. pp. 252-53.

³¹ Marion S. Barry, Jr., and Betty Garman. “SNCC: A Special Report on Southern School Desegregation,” (Atlanta, GA: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1965), p. 3.

combination of both.³² Commissioner Keppel and the HEW also, in some cases, approved plans that called for the desegregation of only two grades.

“Freedom of Choice” plans shifted the responsibility of desegregation from local school boards onto Black parents and families, many of whom were threatened or intimidated by the White Citizens Council, politicians, community leaders, and employers. In Aberdeen, thirty-two gunshots were fired into the home of a Black family who had registered their children in the local white school.³³ During the 1965 school year, the U.S. Department of Justice investigated thirty incidents of intimidation, harassment, or violence of Black families and students in connection with desegregation.³⁴ Such acts of intimidation targeted the individuals directly involved and sent a chilling message across communities, dissuading others from attempting similar actions. This ultimately rendered “Freedom of Choice” plans useless as tools for desegregation. Black students who braved enrollment were sometimes turned away from white schools, as in the case of one senior who applied to transfer to Neshoba County but was told she did not have enough credits to be a senior at the white school.³⁵ This example illustrates how some institutions used seemingly neutral criteria, such as academic prerequisites, to mask racial bias behind the cover of bureaucratic legitimacy when all other options had been exhausted.

SNCC found that Title VI of the CRA failed to make any substantive progress towards desegregation because federal educational leadership was “more concerned about facilitating the flow of federal funds to racist school boards than ensuring equal educational opportunities.”³⁶ They felt that President Johnson put too much pressure on education leadership to approve desegregation plans as quickly as possible and should have ensured a more adequate and developed program for enforcing Title VI in schools before moving ahead. They recommended that he make a statement regarding non-compliant school districts and delegate some responsibility in ensuring that school districts remained compliant with CRA requirements to field investigators or voluntary organizations such as SNCC, as “this work cannot be done from a desk in the capitol city.”³⁷ Their choice not to suggest that power be put in the hands of existing local educational authorities, such as the State Office of Education or local school districts, is pointed and highlights their belief that meaningful change required a novel approach, one that did not rely on the same systems that had been complicit in maintaining segregation for so long.

³² U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Survey of School Desegregation in the Southern Border States 1965-1966*, 1966, p. 20.

³³ Barry, Garman, “SNCC: A Special Report,” p. 23.

³⁴ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Survey of School Desegregation*, p. 38.

³⁵ Barry, Garman, “SNCC: A Special Report,” p. 22.

³⁶ Barry, Garman, “SNCC: A Special Report,” p. 34.

³⁷ Barry, Garman, “SNCC: A Special Report,” p. 31.

The Southern Regional Council, in a 1965 Special Report, also found that the White House and Congress gave very little budget to the Office of Education for the administration of Title VI funds and that too few staffers were hired too late to approve the thousands of desegregation plans which had been submitted.³⁸ In the summer of 1964, there was not a single full-time employee dedicated to Title VI regulation.³⁹ This was a bureaucratic oversight with huge consequences.

If an institution was found to violate Title VI and a complaint was reported to a federal agency, voluntary efforts to correct the violation were first encouraged. Should this fail, the federal agency would take informal steps towards sanctioning the institution, including attempts at persuasion and compromise with leadership. Only after these steps could a hearing be conducted, notification would be given to congressional committees, and the federal agency could terminate, suspend, or refuse federal aid. That federal agency could also refer the case either to the Department of Justice for civil action or to State or local authorities.⁴⁰ While intended to encourage compliance, the emphasis on voluntary correction and informal persuasion often resulted in prolonged delays and insufficient repercussions for non-compliant entities. This leniency allowed institutions to skirt meaningful accountability, as the process prioritized persuasion over swift and decisive action, which was critical after so many years of delays.

The CRA also requested an extensive nationwide survey regarding the availability of equal educational opportunities in public schools for minority groups as compared with opportunities for white students. In this survey, The National Center for Educational Statistics assessed the curriculum offered, school facilities, including textbooks, laboratories, and libraries, and academic characteristics of teachers and larger student bodies. Unsurprisingly, they found that Black students' educational outcomes were not only dismal but significantly more affected by the quality of their school than white students were.⁴¹ Although the survey was exacted on a national scale and its specificity was limited to regions and metropolitan/nonmetropolitan distinctions, its findings directed the subsequent attempts that the federal government would attempt to take in closing educational divides. The huge sums of money that were to come through subsequent policies, although lacking federal direction, attempted to solve the issue of inequitable education between Black and white students by simply improving education quality across the board and without a truly comprehensive, targeted, or particularly well-regulated desegregation plan.

³⁸ Southern Regional Council, *Special Report: School Desegregation: Old Problems Under A New Law*, (Atlanta, GA), 1965, p. 24.

³⁹ Gary Orfield, *The Reconstruction of Southern Education*, p. 65.

⁴⁰ Dean W. Determan, and Gilbert Ware, "New Dimensions in Education: Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *The Journal of Negro Education* 35, no. 1 (1966): pp. 5–10.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2293920>.

⁴¹ James S. Coleman, "Equality of Educational Opportunity," (Washington, D.C., 1966).

A separate survey by the U.S. Commission On Civil Rights that measured the immediate impact of Title VI and school desegregation in two rural Mississippi counties found that in December 1965, only .59% of Black students attended school with white students.⁴² However, they found that at the least, the CRA had made significant progress in getting school districts to agree to desegregate schools and submit plans, although those plans were fundamentally faulty. While Title VI was an inadequate solution on its own, it had begun to lay the groundwork for later federal intervention.

One year after the CRA, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted, establishing a significant shift in the federal government's role in regulating educational affairs.⁴³ ESEA was one of the most important aspects of President Johnson's Great Society policy program, which was concentrated in "our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms."⁴⁴ Keppel, the Commissioner of Education in charge of approving the 1964 desegregation plans, wrote in the *Journal of Negro Education* that "the new Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 promises an enormous thrust of opportunity for the children who have borne the brunt of poor education and isolation in our urban slums and rural areas."⁴⁵ He, as well as President Johnson, wanted to make public schools community centers which were available to the community for twelve to fourteen hours every day, year-round, recognizing the crucial role they played in underserved communities, especially rural ones.⁴⁶ Schools would be institutions for social change under the Great Society, beginning at the very start of a disadvantaged child's life, as well as critical resources for the entire community to access.

President Johnson, continuing his focus on rural poverty, also commissioned a comprehensive study of American rural life called "The People Left Behind Report" during this period. It ultimately found that stark conditions in rural areas had caused a mass migration to urban centers, and those who still lived in rural areas had virtually been abandoned by their compatriots and overlooked by the federal government. In urban areas, about one in eight people were poor, but in rural areas, one in every four people were poor. Non-white families faced even bleaker statistics, as three out of five rural non-white families were poor at this point in time.⁴⁷ This report positioned education as a remedy to rural poverty, an "investment in human capital - an investment that pays great dividends to the

⁴² U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Survey of School Desegregation*, p. 30.

⁴³ David Casalspi, "The Making of a 'Legislative Miracle': The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965," *History of Education Quarterly* 57:2 (2017): pp. 247-77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26356273>.

⁴⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, Remarks at the University of Michigan

⁴⁵ Francis Keppel, "The Emerging Partnership of Education and Civil Rights." *The Journal of Negro Education* 34: 3 (1965): pp. 204-8. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2294191>.

⁴⁶ Keppel, "The Emerging Partnership of Education and Civil Rights."

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, and Edward T. Breathitt, *The People Left Behind* (1967).

individual and society.”⁴⁸ Rural people had not only been physically left behind by their peers due to migration to urban centers, but also left behind in the modern economy, with significantly less schooling and an 18% unemployment rate, compared to a 4% unemployment rate for urbanites.⁴⁹ The Great Society’s investment in education would, theoretically, give the rural poor skills to work in the modern economy and gain more stable and high-paying employment.

With \$1.18 billion dollars in federal grants, ESEA would not only give financial assistance to schools that specifically served low-income children and attempt to address poverty through educational reforms, it would require compliance with desegregation legislation through Title VI of the CRA and finally give the federal government real power in regulating primary and secondary education via established criteria for receiving funding. \$589,956,135 of these dollars, about half, were allocated to the seventeen Southern and border states which faced the most challenges to civil rights, a staggering proportion that reflects the belief in their capability to rectify historical injustices that Johnson’s administration placed in these funds.⁵⁰

ESEA doubled the amount of federal funding that Mississippi schools would receive. Grants were awarded according to the amount of school-age children from low-income families in a given school district, multiplied by one half of the state average per pupil expenditure.⁵¹ “Low-income families,” as defined by the guidelines in ESEA, were families with a yearly income lower than \$2,000. In 1964, Mississippi’s per-capita personal income was \$1,438, by far the lowest in the nation.⁵² At this time, Mississippi also had the lowest average teacher salary and lowest spending per pupil in the nation and its education department was in no position to turn away extra funding.⁵³ The arrival of so many funds offered a lifeline to bolster educational resources for the children in impoverished communities - this financial influx was not merely a fiscal boost but a beacon of hope for an education system under strain. Shockingly, twelve school districts in Mississippi chose to forfeit the federal funds and support of ESEA rather than desegregate, deciding that maintaining segregation was more important than transforming a radically underfunded and underperforming school system.⁵⁴ For example, in Amite

⁴⁸ U.S. Dept. of HEW, *The People Left Behind*.

⁴⁹ U.S. Dept. of HEW, *The People Left Behind*.

⁵⁰ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Survey of School Desegregation*, p. 2.

⁵¹ Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 : H. R. 2362, 89th Cong., 1st Sess., Public Law 89-10. Reports, Bills, Debate and Act. [Washington] :[U.S. Govt. Print. Off.], 1965.

⁵² Senate Hearing, Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Education: Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1966, 89th Congress.

⁵³ Sanders, “Money Talks.”

⁵⁴ Sanders, “Money Talks.”

County, residents voted to increase taxes rather than desegregate schools and have access to ESEA funding.⁵⁵

In contrast to the way desegregation proposals under the CRA were approved, proposals to receive ESEA funds were to be approved by the state Department of Education, under guidelines established by the Keppel and HEW, ultimately leaving the power in the hands of state authorities to ensure where funds went and what they were used for.⁵⁶ This left the door open for potential inconsistencies and biases in distributing funds, potentially favoring certain regions or overlooking specific needs within the state, diluting the impact that Title I intended to have on the targeted low-income communities. The money could also be used for any purpose, as long as it benefited disadvantaged students, so in some cases, it was misallocated towards programs that benefited not only the targeted population, but all students within a given school, or even to programs that did not substantially aid targeted populations.

The guidelines published in ESEA established 1967 as the targeted deadline for achieving desegregation, but districts were mainly instructed to demonstrate a “good faith” effort and create plans for busing, assigning teachers, and work out the other details.⁵⁷ This vague language is reminiscent of the infamous “all deliberate speed” standard outlined in *Brown II* a decade earlier, highlighting the continuous failure of the federal government to ensure that school districts were actually held to rigorous standards regarding desegregation.⁵⁸ Continuing the lax standards that were applied to some schools under the CRA, they were only required to desegregate two grades, a special exception that Keppel made for the state of Mississippi.⁵⁹

In the fall of 1965, 1,750 Black students entered previously all-white schools, and it initiated some of the first true desegregation in the state.⁶⁰ As Orfield wrote in *The Reconstruction of Southern Education*, “a revolutionary breakthrough had been made, even though most of the plans still existed only on paper.”⁶¹ By 1969, Title I funds from ESEA made up between 10-30% of the budgets in 115 Mississippi school districts.⁶² These funds were used to hire teachers, improve educational facilities, offer summer programs, free lunches, and other educational services. Despite their ambitious promises, however, ESEA funds were often misallocated by the State Office of Education and misused by the

⁵⁵ Bolton, “The Hardest Deal of All,” p. 128.

⁵⁶ Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

⁵⁷ Adams, “Just Trying to Have School,” p. 14.

⁵⁸ *Brown II*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

⁵⁹ Sanders, “Money Talks.”

⁶⁰ Sanders, “Money Talks.”

⁶¹ Orfield, *The Reconstruction of Southern Education*, p. 113.

⁶² Bolton, “The Hardest Deal of All,” p. 121.

schools they were awarded to, used to continue the program of equalization which the state had been working towards since *Brown*.

At a 1969 Senate Hearing regarding the renewal of ESEA, Jake Ayers, a working-class parent of six children who attended Title I schools in Glen Allen, criticized both the school district's misuse of ESEA funds and the State's role in facilitating it.⁶³ Ayers found, through discovery depositions, that the state office, which was responsible for approving desegregation plans, had never disapproved of a plan that had come before them, not even having a plan or procedure to do so. They also ignored violations, including "the transfer of Title I materials to non-target schools."⁶⁴ Ayers claimed that Title I money was "used for such whimsical purposes as to mow the lawns at target schools and air condition offices," indicating that the state had a lax attitude towards administering the program, using the new funds as general support for their school and to make their own jobs more comfortable, rather than a targeted attack at poverty.⁶⁵

A second issue with the implementation with ESEA was the lack of Black administrative personnel within the Mississippi State Office of Education. There were no Black local Title I agency coordinators in the Delta, and in the State office, only one of sixteen full-time employees was Black.⁶⁶ This lack of representation led to a disconnect between funding allocation and the nuanced realities of the communities they were intended to serve, emphasizing the critical need for inclusive decision-making processes. For years, education in Mississippi, even in majority-Black areas such as the Delta, had been controlled by white leaders. Black communities and teachers not only had little agency over their own schools, but little agency over these funds which had been designed to specifically address the needs of their communities.

In Coahoma County, prior to ESEA funds, the student to teacher ratio was about fourteen or seventeen-to-one, while in Black schools, the student to teacher ratio was thirty-four-to-one. With Title I funds, the ratio only decreased to twenty-six-to-one.⁶⁷ Not only was the use of funds to continue Mississippi's *Brown*-era equalization project instead of desegregating in direct conflict with the terms of Title I, it did not make significant progress in actually making the two different schools more equal. Teachers who were hired with ESEA funds had no job security if those funds were revoked by the

⁶³ Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, 91st Congress, p. 343, (Jake Ayers).

⁶⁴ Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, p. 344.

⁶⁵ Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, p. 344.

⁶⁶ Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, 91st Congress, p. 343, (Rev. Rims Barber), p. 350.

⁶⁷ Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, p. 357.

federal government for noncompliance. When the school board refused to submit an acceptable desegregation plan under Title VI in 1968, fifty Black teachers lost their jobs mid-year.⁶⁸

The NAACP and Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee sued the school district, to desegregate the schools and over the use of Title I funds. They sought to prevent the State coordinator from continuing to approve any programs that did not comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. He had “testified that he makes no inquiry to determine whether funds, whether projects that are paid for out of Title I funds in Black or disadvantaged schools are the same sort of things that are paid for out of local and State money,” never even looking at audits to confirm that all of the money was accounted for.⁶⁹

Eight of eighteen school districts surveyed by Office of Education staff in a 1969 study used their Title I funds to build materials centers, where any teacher in the school system could check out books or other learning supplies, despite the express language in Title I that funds were only to be used to benefit disadvantaged children.⁷⁰ Ayer’s Congressional Hearing report corroborates this finding, as he complained of materials centers which even teachers of disadvantaged students were unable to utilize, because much of the equipment that was bought with ESEA funds was irrelevant to their actual educational needs and because the centers were at other, non-target schools within the district. Those centers were placed at non-target schools simply because the largely white staff of the State Office of Education managed the centers, and they did not “want to be to be over there with the blacks.”⁷¹ These centers never reached their intended beneficiaries, whether they were filled with “projectors and then no film so that the projectors sit in warehouses” or band uniforms, ultimately wasting money that could have been applied towards a multitude of different programs.⁷²

In Benton County, Title I funded a summer school at one all-white school and one predominantly white school, which was open to “all students who need a credit to meet minimum requirements for graduation or who want an extra math subject credit,” as well as a six-week course in homemaking at its all-Black high school while it paid for an educational summer school program at the white school.⁷³ What better use of funds intended for educational improvements than to perpetuate racialized stereotypes and reinforce disparities? The same money that had been allocated by the federal government in order to improve the long-term educational outcomes of rural, underserved students by

⁶⁸ NAACP, Washington Research Project. *Is It Helping Poor Children? Title I of ESEA: A Report*. p.v

⁶⁹ Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969 p. 357.

⁷⁰ NAACP, Washington Research Project. *Is It Helping Poor Children? Title I of ESEA: A Report*, December 1969, p. 5.

⁷¹ Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, p. 344, p. 351.

⁷² Senate Hearing, Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1969, p. 344, p. 351.

⁷³ NAACP, Washington Research Project, *Is It Helping Poor Children? Title I of ESEA: A Report*, December 1969, p. 7, p. 33.

preparing them to participate in the modern workforce was used to limit the educational scope for some Black students in Benton County.

Blame cannot be entirely placed on state officials, as the federal government certainly played a role in the squandering of ESEA funds. As Gamson, McDermott, and Reed write in “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act at Fifty”, “the [HEW], which had responsibility for enforcing the law, was often more concerned with maintaining relationships with local educational officials than ensuring compliance.”⁷⁴ Just as the process of filing a complaint under the CRA prioritized mediation and persuasion over decisive action against the violating district, the HEW often overlooked violations or failed to respond adequately. A court case that the NAACP filed against HEW, *Adams v. Richardson*, found that the federal government had not started any enforcement action against ten states which had failed to comply with desegregation orders from 1965 to 1969.⁷⁵ The court later found that HEW was responsible for creating an enforcement program to ensure Title VI compliance immediately and school districts that were in violation would lose their federal funding immediately.

In 1969, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* that schools districts not only had a responsibility to immediately terminate all segregated school systems, but that they should not be granted any more time to desegregate because the “all deliberate speed” standard established in *Brown* was no longer constitutionally permissible.⁷⁶ At this point in time, only one in every six Black students in the South attended a desegregated school.⁷⁷ Although this was significantly more than only four years ago, before the CRA and ESEA, the two policies had still failed at initiating true desegregation in the state. Thirty of thirty-three districts named in the case were to be reopened as unitary school systems no later than four months later, and it seemed that there was finally real urgency to federal desegregation policy.

During this time period, as desegregation began in Mississippi, although incredibly slowly, thousands of white students fled to private academies and parochial schools. Between 1966 and 1970, the number of private schools in Mississippi rose from 121 to 236 and the number of students attending them tripled.⁷⁸ The establishment of and white flight to academies stemmed directly from

⁷⁴ David A. Gamson, Kathryn A. McDermott, and Douglas S. Reed, “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act at Fifty: Aspirations, Effects, and Limitations.” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 1, no. 3 (2015): pp. 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2015.1.3.01>.

⁷⁵ *Adams v. Richardson*, 351 F. Supp 636 (1972).

⁷⁶ *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*, 396 U.S. 19 (1969).

⁷⁷ Patric J. Doherty, *Integration Now: A Study of Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*, 45 *Notre Dame L. Rev.* 489 (1970). <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndlr/vol45/iss3/6>.

⁷⁸ Bolton, “The Hardest Deal of All,” p. 173.

the earlier history of organized white resistance to the civil rights movement.⁷⁹ White segregationists tried to “abandon” the public schools by enrolling their children in private schools, hoping that federal courts would then be forced to reconsider integration. Today, segregation still exists across the state, especially in low-income, rural regions like the Delta, and thirty-two school districts across the state are still under federal desegregation orders.⁸⁰ The ongoing presence of federally mandated desegregation orders in these districts highlights the persistent struggles to dismantle segregation and ensure equal educational opportunities for all students, particularly in regions with historical legacies of inequality.

In 2001, ESEA was renamed to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and changed significantly, although the goal remains the same. NCLB is a more comprehensive program to address poverty: it requires states to have education content standards, to test students on those standards, and holds districts accountable for test scores.⁸¹ This power would not have been possible without the administrative framework that ESEA laid. Its legacy is far-reaching in the newfound role of federal programs regulating education, and “alongside the other Great Society programs, ESEA tested the proposition that the federal government has the capacity to alleviate and other social ills. More specifically, ESEA assumed that education is a lever powerful enough to dramatically affect the lives of poor children.”⁸² Although its work has not been completed yet, ESEA ushered in a new era of intervention and regulation in public schools and drastically changed the relationship of local educational organizations to the federal government.

⁷⁹ Kenneth T. Andrews, “Movement-Countermovement Dynamics and the Emergence of New Institutions: The Case of ‘White Flight’ Schools in Mississippi,” *Social Forces* 80:3 (2002): pp. 911–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3086461>.

⁸⁰ Michael Brochstein, “32 Mississippi School Districts Still Under Federal Desegregation Orders,” Associated Press. 1 June 2023.

⁸¹ Gamson, McDermott, Reed, “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act at Fifty.”

⁸² Gamson, McDermott, Reed, “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act at Fifty.”