Sarasotan Students' school boycott stops neighborhood schools from closing, Florida, United States, 1969

U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

3 May 1969
to: 9 May 1969

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Sarasota, Florida

Goals:
To stop the closings of Amaryllis Park Primary School and Booker Elementary School

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 4th segment:

- 062. Student strike
Methods in 5th segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 6th segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 127. Withdrawal from governmental educational institutions
- 128. Boycott of government-supported institutions
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Classifications

Classification:
- Change
- Defense
Cluster:
- Democracy
Group characterization:
- Black students and community members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
- John Rivers, James Logan, Newtown Citizens Committee

Partners:
- New College of Florida students, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

External allies:
- Steve Stottlemyer
Involvement of social elites:
- not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:

- New College of Florida

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Newtown Citizens Committee

Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: approximately 1 day

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
School Board of Sarasota County

Nonviolent responses of opponent: not known
Campaigner violence: not known
Repressive Violence: not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals: 6 points out of 6 points
Survival: 1 point out of 1 points
Growth: 1 point out of 3 points

Before Booker Grammar School, Sarasota’s first Black public school, was established in 1925, Black students received their education at home or in churches. The establishment of three other schools for Black students -- Amaryllis Park for first through third graders, Booker Junior High, for seventh and eighth graders, and Booker High School, for ninth through twelfth graders -- followed. These schools, located centrally within Sarasota’s African-American community, Newtown, became deeply rooted institutions within the community. The first class of seniors graduated from Booker High School in 1935.

In the late 1960s, Sarasota’s Black community almost lost these schools when the Sarasota County School Board closed Booker High School and Booker Junior High School and came close to closing Booker Elementary and Amaryllis Park. In May 1969, a student boycott of Sarasota county’s public schools convinced the School Board to reopen the schools.

In the 1954 Supreme Court Case Brown vs. Board of Education, the Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, but three years after the decision Sarasota public schools remained segregated. In 1957, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) requested that the Sarasota County School Board voluntarily desegregate its public schools. By 1961, Sarasota schools still remained segregated, and the NAACP filed a desegregation lawsuit against Sarasota County School Board. In 1962, The Sarasota County School Board integrated an all-white school by allowing the first
Black students to enroll in Bay Haven Elementary.

In 1965, after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the U.S. Federal Government tied school district funding to compliance with the act, which ordered all schools to integrate by 1967. Like many other school districts, the Sarasota County School Board, decided to comply with the act by closing Black Sarasota schools and busing the Black students who had attended these schools to formerly all-White schools. Several members of the Newtown community wrote letters to the editor of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune in opposition to the closing of schools in the Black community. In a Herald-Tribune article, Reverend D.W. Judge, wrote: “Again, there appears to be an effort in the wind to give the Negro children and community the short end of the stick. [The desegregation plan favored by the Board] implies that white children are still too precious to walk through a Negro neighborhood but Negros are not too good to walk through white neighborhoods.” Members of the Newtown community members supported integration, but they did not want neighborhood schools to close. In spite of what the Newtown community wanted, the School Board of Sarasota County closed Booker High School in 1967 and closed Booker Junior High School in 1968.

Both students and community members felt a sense of pride and attachment to these schools. The School Board closed Booker High the year before former Booker High School student Helen James would have been a senior. She said that she and her friends “wanted so badly to graduate from Booker. So we had a very sad summer [when we heard that Booker would be closed].” She added, “We felt like we were cheated. Nothing else in Sarasota was closed, so why Booker?” Upon hearing of Booker High’s closing, Al Singleton, a former Booker High student who had voluntarily enrolled in a formerly all-white high school, said he, “didn’t particularly like the idea that Booker was closed… I was sort of sad when it was closed.”

James Logan, who had been forced to attend a formerly all-white school, explained why the local schools were important to members of the Newtown community: “We had ownership, as far as we were concerned. When you live in an area and people are forced to stay, you start to make accommodation. This is our school, and we’re proud of it. And that’s the way we talked about it back then. This is our school.”

The 1964-66 Booker High School principal Jerome Dupree remembered the closing in a 2013 interview with the Herald-Tribune. “We felt we were being hijacked. Of all the schools in the county — and Booker being among the oldest — why would they close our school? That was a slap in the face in our community,” he said.

The forced integration of Black students bused into all-white schools caused tension among students at the schools. Sarasota newspaper articles from the late 1960s described bomb threats, a white student bringing a gun to school, Black female students stopping white female students from entering a bathroom, and vandalism of school grounds in which someone painted swastikas and the message “no integration.” James Logan described the situation: “We were going to a white school where nobody wanted us.”

In 1969, the School Board of Sarasota County announced that it would be closing Booker Elementary School and Amaryllis Park Primary school. Fredd Atkins, who was a senior in high school when this announcement was made (and who was later elected Sarasota’s first African-American mayor in 1987), said that the planned elementary school closing “was the straw that broke the camel’s back.” After the 1969 announcement to close Booker Elementary and Amaryllis Park, Sarasota’s Black community took action to protect its local schools.

John Rivers, the president of the local NAACP, sent a resolution from the NAACP to the School Board of Sarasota County that asked the board to bus white students to the Booker schools instead of closing the schools, but the board rejected the plan. James Logan, who was 18 years old at the time, began traveling door-to-door through Newtown after school and on weekends to talk to his neighbors about the further closings of the local Booker schools and the need to take action. He led other students to do the same.

On 3 May 1969, John Rivers led a meeting at the Newtown Community Center to take action against the School Board’s plan for integration. James Logan spoke at the meeting and other youth NAACP members, including Fredd Atkins and Sheila
Sanders, actively participated. By the end of the meeting, the residents of Newtown decided that to stop the closings of the local Booker schools, Black students would boycott Sarasota schools and instead attend local “Freedom Schools.”

On 5 May 1969, 85 percent of Black students from all grade levels enrolled in Sarasota County schools, a total of 2,353 students, did not attend school. After 5 May some students did return, but 75 percent of Black students continued to boycott. In the Freedom Schools, students from New College of Florida, older high school students, and other community volunteers gave the boycotting students lessons at homes and in churches. James Logan became the superintendent of the Freedom Schools, traveling from location to location to make sure that lessons ran smoothly and that children were orderly and fed. Some community cooks took time off from work to make lunch for the students. Other community members donated school supplies. Young adult activists coordinated press coverage of the boycott.

Adult members of Newtown formed the Newtown Citizens Committee to negotiate with the School Board. The committee sought legal advice from Steve Stottlemyer, a local white lawyer, on how to legally fight for balanced busing so that the local Newtown schools could remain open and white students could be bused into Newtown. The NAACP pressed an injunction against the School Board of Sarasota County to stop the closing of the Amaryllis Park school.

The School Board estimated that the enrollment drop was costing $5,000 per day. On 6 May 1969 the School Board voted to send home letters to the parents of all boycotting students threatening 90-day jail terms and $100 fines if their children violated state truancy laws. Jerome Stevens, the leader of the Newtown Citizens Committee said, “Let them arrest us.”

In the late hours of the fifth and final day of the boycott, 9 May 1969, the School Board of Sarasota County decided that Booker Elementary and Amaryllis Park school would remain open and that they would not take action against students and parents for the week of missed class. Booker Elementary became a magnet school to encourage white students to voluntarily integrate, with Booker High School and Booker Junior High to follow in 1970.

Research Notes

Sources:


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