

# African Americans campaign for reopening of public schools in Prince Edward County, Farmville, VA, 1959-1964

- [U.S. Civil Rights Movement \(1950s-1960s\)](#) [1]
- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [2]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [3]
- [local community or neighborhood-level campaign](#) [4]

- [U.S. Civil Rights Movement \(1950s-1960s\)](#)

## Timing

1959

to:

1964

## Location and Goals

Country:

United States

Location City/State/Province:

Prince Edward County, Virginia

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Their primary objective was to reopen public schools in Prince Edward County, but their demands also included an increase in job opportunities and civil liberties for African-American residents.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 4th segment:

- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 5th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 162. Sit-in
- 167. Pray-in
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 6th segment:

- 179. Alternative social institutions

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 013. Deputations

Segment Length:

Approximately 1 year

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- African-American students

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

No single group of known leaders. Local church leaders including Baptist minister L. Francis Griffin supported protests and demonstrations.

Partners:

Local Churches, African-American Community, National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), National Council of Negro Women

External allies:

American Friends Service Committee, United Federation of Teachers

(UFT), Queens College New York Students

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- American Friends Service Committee
- Local Churches
- NAACP
- National Council of Negro Women

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Queens College New York Students
- SNCC
- UFT

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 1 year

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

US Senator Harry F. Byrd, Byrd Organization, Board of Supervisors for

Prince Edward County, Virginia General Assembly, Jim Crow segregation laws, Massive Resistance campaign

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Students arrested during demonstrations and sit-ins.

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Total points:

7 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

The student campaign was successful in reopening and desegregating public schools in Prince Edward County. However, it did not immediately achieve its goals of increasing job opportunities and civil liberties for all African-American residents in the county.

Student demonstrations gained increasing support from the local African-American community and from students who traveled to Prince Edward County from several northern colleges

Rather than comply with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka

that called for the desegregation of public schools, the Board of Supervisors of Prince Edward County refused to appropriate funds to its public schools and effectively shut them down in 1959.

Arguing that the Supreme Court was infringing upon state rights, U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd promoted a Massive Resistance campaign that sought to resist the Court's ruling and to support the decision to close the county's public schools. The all-white Virginia General Assembly also passed a series of laws to prevent public school desegregation within the state.

During this period, the Prince Edward County set up several all-white private schools, which received funding from both the state and county (through the form of tax credits and donations).

With the closing of their public schools, African-American students were left with few options. Among the 1,800 students, some traveled to other counties to finish their high school education, while others sought employment to help support their families. Still, others who remained in Prince Edward County refused to forego their education.

With the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Council of Negro Women, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and the American Friends Service Committee, provisional classes were held in the basements of local churches and other available spaces. These "Freedom Schools" attracted both teacher and student volunteers from the north, and white volunteers tried to help facilitate a dialogue between the county's education officials and black community leaders so that the public schools could be reopened and African-American students could return to school. However, these efforts were met with resistance as the all-white Board of Supervisors sought to impede any moves toward compliance with the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling.

Because national attention was focused on the Civil Rights campaigns that were being staged throughout the country, media outlets reported on Prince Edward County's denial of public school education to its African-American students. Students from the north who passed through the county on their way down south to participate in the Freedom Rides in the summer of 1963 often expressed their frustration with the situation.

In order to pressure the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors to reopen its public schools, civil rights organizations that were working in the county called in two field workers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to facilitate nonviolence workshops in church basements in the summer of 1963. With the support of the local Baptist minister L. Francis Griffin, students participated in a direct action campaign that included sit-ins at several Farmville restaurants, pray-ins at segregated churches, marches to and

demonstrations at local government buildings, and an economic boycott of Farmville stores that did not hire African-Americans.

This campaign was met with much white resistance as demonstrating students were arrested by policemen and later fined. In order to stop the picketing of businesses, county officials changed picketing codes and had groups of African-Americans arrested for congregating in public spaces.

However, the demonstrations continued into the fall of 1963, and in 1964 the Supreme Court ruled in *Griffin v. County School Board*

that the Board of Supervisors had to immediately reopen and desegregate its public schools. Because this ruling was matched with much media attention and the threat of federal enforcement, the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors reopened and desegregated its public schools in 1964.

## Research Notes

Influences:

Student sit-ins and other civil rights campaigns that were occurring in many American cities during this time period helped encourage the students of Prince Edward County to demonstrate and demand their rights. (1)

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

See film "They Closed Our Schools: 1959-64", Mercy Seat Films, 2003.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Aden Tedla, 30/01/2010

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