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Eighth Annual Education Conference

Kenneth Toler

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I have tackled many difficult assignments in my 29 years of newspaper reporting, but the one I am going to deal with here tonight is by far the toughest. Not so much because of the subject itself, but from the drastic changes it faces at the moment and the many avenues of approach, any one of which can be successfully challenged in some area of thinking.

As your program indicated, I am booked for an interpretation of Mississippi's new educational program. That in itself has several interpretations in the light of recent developments.

One, the state legislative enactment of a new Negro-White public school equalization program.

Second, and more far-reaching, the May 17 ruling of the United States Supreme Court banning just what the Legislature sought to accomplish—separate, but equal, opportunities for the races in Mississippi.

And as three always follows two, the other is the planning now underway in Mississippi to "get around" the Number 2 development, rather than a long range eventuality which even its bitterest foes feel will come in time. There is no higher court to turn to now.

I realize there are others on the program better equipped to deal with the subject from an educator's viewpoint. On that score, it might be well that you selected a "layman" to talk with you since the responsibilities also rest on those shoulders.

Like those in my profession, it could be that at times we may be too close to the trees to see the forests in our own fields.

Your primary job is to carry out whatever the legislature, made up largely of laymen, blue-prints for you. Therefore, a so-called "pulse-feeling" of the others in this educational team could be most timely.

Those in the educational field have, I know, felt a bit of resentment at times at the handling of their program by laymen. And in reverse order, the laymen have bowed their backs at many of the recommendations coming from school people. That's because they have felt the school group was looking out after its own personal welfare, rather than the overall good of education.

As we all know, Mississippi's school system is operating under the Constitution of 1890. That's 64 years ago.
With all those years for the development of a better overall program, one that would have minimized present-day efforts to change its basic foundation of separate, but equal, opportunities, what have we done by way of programs to sell the people on needed revisions? I'm talking about pre-Citizens Council on Education days.

It seems that everybody was satisfied so long as each succeeding legislature voted more money for education. That has always been the paramount program of the educational leaders since 1928, I know.

Let's look at an official documentation of what the situation was up until 1954.

A recess legislative school study committee was created in 1952. After almost a year's study of the school system, here is what it said officially:

"Mississippi has more than 500 statutes pertaining to its public schools. A review of these laws shows that they are antiquated, and that the attempts through the years to improve on them have resulted in a hopeless patchwork of laws that are difficult to interpret and equally difficult to administer."

That same committee said:

"One of the serious faults of the state school system is the excessive number of administrative districts.

"There are 840 administrative districts for our white public schools, an average of more than ten to the county.

"We have 1,239 colored administrative districts, or an average of more than fifteen per county. In actual practice," and I continue to read from the committee's report, "the number of Negro districts is much higher than 1,239 because many of the counties have set up county-wide Negro school districts which never functioned as such. Thus, they are county-wide districts in name only and actually embrace a large number of administrative units not counted in the total shown above.

"This," the committee pointed out, "gives Mississippi at least 2,079 administrative school districts. Most southern states have less than 200."

Even in the face of the report showing how this states rights, constitutional state, had failed to live up to the 1890 constitutional guaranty of equal opportunities for the races, it revealed inadequacies in the white system in these words:

"While there is a wide variance in educational opportunity between the white and colored races, one of Mississippi's most serious problems lies in the variance in educational opportunity between white schools in rural and urban areas."

And, I add here, why not? With so many school districts.

I believe a lot of us could agree that an educational campaign years ago to sell the people on consolidations would have cured many of these ills. They would have assured those in the rural areas an educational background partially sufficient, at least, to cope a little better with their city cousins, who sooner or later they must compete with in the business, as well as other fields.
Along this line, I was interested in the 1952-53 statistical data of the state department of education. Every comparison dealt with dollars and cents and none with any improvement in the other phases of common school education.

True, it takes money to run schools. But what about the "rat holes?"

I have it on the authority of a member of the school study recess committee that an out-of-state consultant told the group that unless Mississippi's administrative machinery was given a complete overhaul, that regardless of how much the legislature voted on the present basis of operation, at least $5,000,000 would be wasted. And, to the credit of the committee it recommended some vast improvements to plug those holes.

But, what happened? So-called spokesmen for education, in the Legislature, opposed many of them. Oddly, but as expected by reason of the politics involved, the issues opposed were those having to do with changes on the policy and administrative level.

They included a proposal to do away with an ex-officio board which is the state's top authority in school matters; to remove the superintendents from politics by raising their qualifications and making them appointive. It was by the hardest that a proposal creating a special educational finance commission gained approval. Opponents charged it was curbing the power of the state department.

The so-called legislative school block didn't want an independent agency to deal with. They wanted to retain the ex-officio board of state-wide elective officials, so political pressure could be applied to them.

The trouble has been that education was considered a "commodity" and not an obligation and responsibility in legislative circles.

On that premise, the legislature retained the administrative as well as legislative authority over schools. Too long has there been a legislative distrust of school officials. (I suppose it stems from a feeling that all they want is more money.)

But, frankly, which of the two is better fitted to judge the educational needs?

How many states leave the policy-making, as well as fund disbursement, of their public schools to ex-officio groups? Mississippi does, and look what condition it has created.

This is no reflection on the members of our ex-officio state board of education. Far from it. The attorney general is more concerned with the doings in his office and his attention must be focused there. Yet, he is called on with another ex-officio official, the secretary of state, to shape our school policies and programs. I don't know of any official who has more work to do in his own official jurisdiction, including supervision of the two state capitols, war memorial building and new state office building, than the secretary of state.

Yet, the legislature balked at creation of an independent policy-making board.

Not content with the ex-officio setup, the legislature has over the years limited its authority, as well as that of the state department of education. That's because of our adherence to local level operations.

Few people outside the school family realize that the state has no authority over school funds once they reach the local level. That limited jurisdiction from the state level is one of the things that brought about the recent supreme court action.
Look what opposition to state level interference with local political subdivisions in school matters brought us—a directive all the way from Washington applicable all the way down to the smallest school district.

Even in the face of the ruling, the local levels insist that the status quo will remain. If it does it will because those who have endured inequities in their educational opportunities, will voluntarily agree to its continuance provided those disparities are removed by action and not mere assurances.

In order to properly interpret Mississippi’s new educational program, I feel it is necessary to take a look at some of the other things which brought it about—many years late and after a lot of unkept promises.

To say the least, Mississippi’s Negro school leaders have been patient. Back in 1944, and even before, they were promised that the two systems would be equalized over a long range period. Here in 1954, with that program still inoperative, we are faced with a United States Supreme Court mandate to integrate the system.

Although we feel the Court could have mandated us that unless our 64 years ignored constitutional provision is immediately made effective, it would take more drastic steps. Here is what we admitted in an official report by the legislative school study committee as of 1952:

"The condition of Mississippi’s schools for Negroes in rural areas is pathetic and in some cases it is inexcusable.

"Hundreds of children of the Negro race are compelled to attend school—if they attend at all—in unpainted, unheated and unlighted buildings that are not fit for human habitation and should have been condemned many years ago."

That was one of the most serious indictments ever leveled at our dual system. And, it didn’t come from so-called "northern agitators." It was of our own admission.

That report didn’t stop there. It continued, and I quote:

"There are very few rural schools for Negroes in Mississippi that have sanitary drinking water facilities or sanitary toilet facilities.

"Because of the rarity of a tax levy for support or maintenance of Negro schools, many Negro school buildings which once were creditable structures have deteriorated beyond repair for lack of maintenance."

And the crux of the report contained these words:

"According to the report of the State Auditor, in many counties money specifically appropriated for equalizing the pay of Negro teachers which was sent to the counties for that purpose never got to the Negro teachers. For that matter," the report added, "it has never been returned to the state treasury, either. The committee does not know for what purpose the money was spent."

As you recall, the committee turned that matter over to Attorney General J. P. Coleman and about 26 counties returned the money to the treasury. Some had reasons for not spending the money as it was supposed to have been spent—and as voted by the legislature—and others didn’t.
It's bad enough for the legislature not to vote enough money for schools, but when it does and it is not spent according to law, then that shows how lax we have been in trying to safeguard our segregated system through some pretense of equality.

In that same officially documented report, the recess committee for the first time revealed the dollars and cents disparities in the dual system. It said the revelation "will shock some people." And it did.

It had to do with, and I quote, "the great difference in the per pupil cost for the two races in Mississippi."

In a county with 81 percent of its population Negroes, the expenditure per white pupil was $270.69, against $21.36 for Negroes. One school district in a delta county with 11,000 whites and 19,000 Negroes, expenditures per white pupil were shown at $464.49, and only $13.71 for Negroes.

A central sector county with a population ratio of 25,000 Negroes to 9,000 whites, $300.33 was spent per white student, against $46.20 for each Negro.

Yet, in those counties as well as others where disparity was the practice, as well as the rule, the state funds sent to them were based on a "head count" of the educable children without regard to race.

Is there any wonder that only one colored child in 40 who enrolls in school graduates? That's against one white out of every four.

Or why more than half of the 4,031 school buildings in Mississippi are one and two teacher affairs.

Little wonder that of the 71,437 Negro children who entered the first grade in 1952, that 40,185 dropped out before reaching the second. That compares with the loss of 8,743 of the 35,110 whites who entered the first grade compared to the second grade enrollment.

Of those 71,437 Negro children who entered the first grade, their number had dwindled to 15,269 by the time they reached the eighth, down to 10,872 in the 9th grade, with 3,671 winding up as graduates.

Of the initial white enrollment of 35,110, a total of 21,941 reached the eighth, with the ninth registering 19,664 and graduation coming to 12,045.

The statistics, taken from the state department of education's report, show that the level of education for most of the Negroes goes to the 5th grade.

The percentage of whites going through the 12 grades in the 1952-53 session was 25.9 percent, against 3.6 for Negroes.

To my way of thinking, those are the fields in which we should have shown more concern over the years.

Not to mention the committee's disclosure that 244,179 more children of educable age were shown in the school census than in the 1950 federal census.

The school census showed 298,866 educable whites against 496,913 Negroes. That compares with the 1952-53 enrollment of 272,549 whites and 271,856 Negroes.
Some other glaring figures showed our failure to live up to the constitutional provision for separate, but equal, opportunities.

In the facility phase, here is what was shown by the state department of education:

White high schools and junior college, 64, against 6 for negroes.

High school and elementary schools, 410 for whites and 279 for negroes.

Elementary only: 530, whites, against 2,049 for negroes.

There were 298 white one-two and three-teacher schools, against 1,849 for negroes. One-teacher white schools totaled 42 against 1,077 for negroes; 2-teacher white, 82 and 612 negroes; and 3-teacher whites 174 and 160 negroes.

On the teacher salary issue, further differences were reported.

In the 1952-53 session, the average white classroom teacher salary was $2,109 against $1,153 for negroes.

We have made much progress in that field. In the 1941-42 session, the average white classroom teacher's salary was $735. In that period, we gained 1,424 white teachers for a 1952-53 total of 8,744.

Negro teachers in the 1941-42 term were paid an average of $232 a year. But the number dropped off 243 for the latest total of 6,480.

Under the new salary schedule outlined in the equalization program, the disparities are supposed to be eliminated. That is, insofar as state funds are involved. They can still exist through the so-called "enriched" program supported from local taxes.

The average salary now paid white classroom teachers with M.A. degrees is $2,687, against $2,060 for negroes. B. A. degree holders, it is $2,155 for whites and $1,607 for negroes.

Other present day averages include:

Those with 3 years' college training: Whites; $1,768, negroes, $1,258.

Two years' college training: whites, $1,600; negroes, $1,089.

One year college training: whites, $1,500; negroes, $922.

High school graduates: Whites, $1,357; negroes, $744.

There are only 1,977 whites with three year's college training and less, against 4,680 negroes.

Indicative of the efforts of negro teachers to better themselves, in 1943-44 there were 684 with B. A. degrees against 1,248 today. That compares with 4,577 whites ten years ago and 6,640 now.

The number of white teachers with 3 years' college training dropped in that ten year period from 1,441 to 1,248, while the number of negroes increased from 308 to 825.
White teachers with 2 years' college training dropped in that period from 1,514 to 525, while the negroes increased from 788 to 1,221; and with one year's college training, the number of white teachers dropped from 644 to 140, while the negroes increased from 921 to 1,390.

We were either not training negro teachers, or those with higher education were going elsewhere.

There was more than that which caused our present "crisis;"

In the 1952-53 term, we spent $4,476,753 transporting white children to school, and $1,179,826 on negroes. A total of 146,066 whites rode to school, and only 58,090 negroes on an average daily transportation basis.

Mississippi spent $23,536,022 on instruction for its white children, and $8,816,670 on negroes. The total instructional cost of $32,352,692 rose from $10,394,244 in 1942-43 or up $21,958,468.

In the 1942-43 period, Mississippi spent $33.16 to educate each child, and in 1952-53 that cost rose to $100.81. The national average is $223. In that period, the average daily attendance fell off 17,809 for a 1952-53 total of 464,375.

With the state putting up 54 percent of the school cost, against 12.7 by the counties and 32.4 by the separate districts, there seems to be merit in more state level control.

And that is just what the new program enacted in 1953, and partially completed in 1954 set out to do. Even in the face of the past experience, strong opposition was registered against asserted "centralization" in Jackson.

All this background brings us down to May 17, 1954.

Where do we go from there?

I am certain it will be some years before an actual showdown on integration faces Mississippi. That doesn't mean there won't be some efforts made sooner, but litigation will be the delaying weapon.

Still facing the states with dual systems is the actual wording of the court's decision banning segregation. I believe most of us feel that the court will set a timetable for its execution.

In the meantime, some phases of the new negro-white equalization program can be started regardless of the end decision in the segregation contest.

They include:

Inauguration of the new salary schedule based on training and experience and applicable to teachers without regard to race—or political influences on the local levels.

Provide transportation for eligible negro children.

And most important of all, a study looking to consolidation of the state's more than 2,000 local school districts.
The educational finance commission which organized Tuesday is the final authority in the new school districts. They will meet stiff opposition from small communities whose citizens do not want to give up their so-called "gathering centers." The school officials can do them a service by showing that fewer districts means better schools with more experienced teachers and the opportunity for rural children to get an education equal with that of those in the municipal separate districts and wealthier areas.

I think the child's welfare is paramount to the "community center." Anyway, the churches in the neighborhood will still be there.

Locally, the county boards of education created under the new program have extended powers, but their actions must be approved by the state commission. That's as it should be with the state putting up nearly 60 percent of the school funds. Too, it will permit creation of stronger districts since the local influences will be far removed.

The new salary schedule, defeated years ago when one of its sponsors admitted it would apply to negroes on the same level as with whites, will be needed regardless of any other changes in the dual system. It guarantees equal salaries from the state level, but still leaves the way for disparities through locally supplemented funds.

Some white teachers can expect salary reductions in keeping with their training, while some negroes will receive raises. The present disparities spoken of earlier in this message, will bring that about. No longer can the school board set an arbitrary schedule, that is, insofar as state support funds are involved.

Another new statute will result in a larger enrollment next fall. It permits children reaching their 6th birthday on or before January 1 to enter school. In many areas, the cut-off age is as of December 1 and December 15. The city of Jackson anticipates an 8 percent increase from the new age-of-entry statute.

School principals now select faculties instead of superintendents and trustees, although the latter still have veto power.

I believe those are the major changes.

Until the segregation issue is worked out, the question of equalizing facilities will probably remain static. However, as state superintendent of education, Jack Tubb, so aptly told the new 25-member legal educational advisory committee studying a bypass of the court's decision, if we have segregation, we will have to have places for the children to attend school.

It is highly doubtful, though, that the legislature will vote building funds without a definite assurance that integration will not be attempted. How all those involved can be bound by any sort of "voluntary" agreement is beyond me to understand.

As hard as the nonsegregation blow was, it did not stir Mississippians to radicalism. I know in a few instances some threatening statements were made, but in one of those cases the author has since taken on a calm and, we might say, collected approach.

Neither did the negroes spring to action and demand admittance to white schools. While that may come later, at least for all concerned at the moment, a spirit of cooperation has been assured.

I don't believe that threats of the state abolishing its public school system has influenced the calmness. It is rather a show of the friendly relations that exist.
between the races. Possibly it should be admitted that some of it probably stems from a realization that the economic welfare of the one is dependent on the other, or a sense of knowing on what side your bread is buttered.

Still, I am influenced into believing it is rather a measure of proof of the friendly relations that exist between the races here in Mississippi.

In support of that belief is the statement of negro leaders that their aim is equal opportunities for their children, not mixing of the races.

And from the pen of a negro editor, who advocates abolition of all forms of racial segregation by law, comes this statement:

"In regard to the abolition of segregation in the public school, with our reference limited to the grade schools, we hold to our view that because the negro communities in Mississippi have become well-established and defined under the impact of segregation, there should be a public school in each such community for the children of that community. And, with segregation by law abolished, all other things being equal, such a school with nothing but negro children, taught by negro teachers, is no longer a segregated school but an American school; and just as much an American school as one filled with nothing but white children, and taught only by white teachers."

He said further:

"Viewing the future of the state in the light of the decision of the United States Supreme Court, the greatest need now is for the getting together of negro and white people for the discussion and working out of the conditions at the local level. Nothing is being accomplished with a crowd of white people in a meeting somewhere talking about negroes; and a crowd of negroes somewhere in a meeting talking about white folks."

And I will wind up with his closing paragraph:

"A new and better day for Mississippi is waiting for the meeting together of its negro and white people."