State-Supported Schools for the Blind for African-American Children

8:29 PM Carole Adrienne No comments

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The first school for blind children in the United States was chartered in 1829, in Boston. It was quickly followed by schools in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. In these cities, as well as other Northern cities in which schools for the blind were established, black and white children attended the same classes.

In the South, however, racial attitudes, complicated by the institution of slavery, were much different. Slowly, after the close of the Civil War in 1865, the states in which slavery had been well established began to open departments or divisions for African-American children, usually in facilities separate from the school for white children. By the middle of the twentieth century, there were fifteen residential schools for African-American children who were blind: North Carolina, founded in 1869; Maryland, 1872; Tennessee, 1882; Georgia, 1882; South Carolina, 1883; Kentucky, 1884; Texas, 1887; Arkansas, 1889; Alabama, 1892; Florida, 1895; Oklahoma, 1909; Virginia, 1910; Louisiana, 1892; West Virginia, 1929; and Mississippi, 1951. Thus, as one Southern legislator remarked, "color was distinguished where no color was seen."

Ironically, in nineteenth century, separate schools for African-American children who were blind were viewed as a positive social reform and were encouraged as much by African- American leaders as by whites. Separate but equal education had been established as the law, and, for a while, it seemed to promise two flourishing societies, one white, one black, in the same country. The author of the entry on "blindness" in the 1918 Encyclopedia Americana observed:

In northern schools the colored blind are educated with the white; in Southern schools it is best for the colored to have schools of their own. Both the whites and they prefer this arrangement.

In the two decades following the Civil War, African-American leaders generally left unchallenged the existence of segregation in social programs. When they felt denied certain benefits, such as education for blind children, they demanded the establishment of separate programs. The Georgia Academy for the Blind responded to petitions from black churches when it proposed the "Negro Division" of the Georgia School for the Blind in 1881. A black legislator, Thomas A. Sykes, introduced the bill that provided the

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"Colored Department" for the Tennessee School for the Blind in Nashville, and in West Virginia, three black legislators pushed for the creation of a school to serve both the deaf and blind. In both Tennessee and Texas, where African-American women had taken on the task of teaching blind children in their own homes, the state formalized what already existing by making the women the matrons, or housemothers, of the new schools.

The ten schools founded in the nineteenth century were created as departments of the already-established schools for white children and were under the nominal rule of the white superintendent. Students were housed in separate campuses or separate buildings on the same campus. The five schools founded after the twentieth century--Oklahoma, Virginia, Louisiana, West Virginia, and Mississippi--had no ties with the white school.

As was true throughout the South, in the public schools, equipment, materials and facilities provided for African-American children who were blind were generally, although not always, inferior, and their education suffered, despite the efforts of excellent teachers and supportive families. In 1945, Charles Buell pointed out that the annual reports issued by the various schools "suggest to the reader that the education of the Negro is similar to that for the white students." Buell's exhaustive study of the curriculum of the schools for African-American blind children indicated "this theory is not put into practice." He found that the "colored departments," as a whole, spent more time on manual training, that science classes suffered for lack of laboratory equipment, that texts were outdated and inadequate, and that instruction was formal and not practical.

Buildings housing African-American students were sometimes unsafe and their furnishings bare, with "worn furniture, chipped crockery, and faded towels." A teacher at the Negro Department of the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind recalled, somewhat bitterly, "When a typewriter or a sewing machine got too old or broke on North Campus, they'd send it over to us." Margaret Johnson, who attended the whites-only school for the blind in Arkansas in the 1950s, remembers, even as a child, being appalled by the conditions at the black school, where the white students were bused for a Christmas concert. Their auditorium "had no stage and only straight-backed chairs." She also remembered feeling bad that the white school's worn-out books were sent to the Colored Department; "Why, the dots were so worn they could scarcely be read," she said.

In general, teacher-pupil ratios were higher in the African-American schools and teachers' salaries were lower. African-American teachers could not attend training courses offered at segregated universities, nor could they afford to attend similar institutions in the North. Enrolling children was also a problem. Not all African-American children who were blind attended the state schools, despite compulsory education laws. To identify students, an African-American superintendent would have had to visit places throughout the state, asking questions and checking public records--not a safe undertaking in the Jim Crow South.

In the 1940s, Helen Keller emphasized the needs of African-American children who were blind to a committee studying the public and private aid given to physically disabled students.

"In my travels up and down the continent I have visited their shabby school buildings . . . I have been shocked by the meagerness of their education . . . I feel it is a disgrace that in this great wealthy land, each injustice should exist to men and women of a different race--and blind at that!"

Her words were instrumental in prodding the state of Mississippi to establish a state school for African-American students who were blind. However, the battle for legislative support was intense, and the Mississippi School for the Negro Blind didn't open its doors to students until 1951—only three years before the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education signaled the end of segregated schools in the United States.

It was more the beginning of the end than the end itself. The process of integration took

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nearly twenty-five years and varied considerably by state. Some schools integrated peacefully, with little fanfare, whereas others dealt with lawsuits and threats, just as schools for sighted children. Some schools did not integrate until after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, in 1964. Other schools delayed integration into the 1970s. Among the first schools, sighted or blind, to be integrated in the United States were the Kentucky School for the Blind and the West Virginia School for the Blind, both in the summer of 1955. One of the last schools in the South to be integrated, sighted or blind, was the Louisiana School for the Blind, in 1978.

Even though classrooms were integrated in the North, some dormitories were not. In the 1940s, the Missouri School for the Blind had separate dormitories for white and blacks.

Change is slow. In a 1945 study of the "Education of the Negro Blind" in the United States, Charles Buell notes that an earlier study, done in the 1920s, "assumed that all Negroes desire segregated schools, but many leaders among the colored people have expressed the opposite point of view".

In Mississippi, African-American children who were blind could attend the Piney Woods Country Life School, a private boarding school for African-American Youth. A department for deaf and blind children was established in 1929, and the school did receive some money for the students' room and board from the state of Mississippi at the outset.

Image: Museum at the Perkins Institution for the Blind

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