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# Advocating For Educational Equity: African American Citizens' Councils in St. Louis, Missouri, From 1864 To 1927

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ADVOCATING FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY: AFRICAN AMERICAN CITIZENS'  
COUNCILS IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, FROM 1864 TO 1927

by

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## **Abstract**

Whether in slavery or in freedom, African Americans understood the important role education played in their quest towards citizenship. As enslaved people, they risked their lives to learn to read and write so they would be prepared when freedom came their way. As free people, they continued to strive for an education that would move them beyond their prescribed station in life. Throughout the history of African Americans, they actively pursued their educational aspirations instead of patiently waiting for them to be granted.

The research associated with educational agency before and after the Civil War provides some insight into the ways African Americans worked towards liberation. From paying for their own teachers to building their own schools, African Americans are primary players in the narrative of educational advancements in the South. These stories of agency are in direct contrast to the stories of Northern philanthropists being responsible for African American education in the Southern states. Many of these narratives of African American agency are relatively new to the field and don't take into account border states such as Missouri.

This dissertation looks at African American educational agency in St. Louis, Missouri, a city in a state that was North enough to be in the Union, but South enough to permit slavery. Because of this dichotomy of ideology, Missouri is usually left out of discussions on issues of race and education because it did not neatly fit into a geographical region. Instead of asking how and why Missouri fit into the national narrative of African American education, such questions were merely a footnote, if they were mentioned at all.

Instead of viewing the duality of Missouri's state identity as something to be ignored, this dissertation views it as a challenge to propel the story of African American educational agency in St. Louis to center stage. Starting with the creation of an African American school board in the

1860s through the construction of Vashon High School in 1927, the story of African American agency is told through the lens of the citizens' councils that were organized to advocate for educational advancement. The men who comprised the citizens' councils worked tirelessly to insure that the educational dreams of former enslaved people were realized generation after generation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*The Negro will solve his problems. White people or others may help him; but the fact remains that the Negro must pilot his own life.*

--Herman Dreer, *Meditations of Herman Dreer, A Philosophy of Life*, 1937

These words by St. Louis Sumner High School teacher Herman Dreer served as both a reminder and a call to action for African Americans. Written more than seventy years after the end of slavery, the statement expresses the advocacy role African Americans played in gaining their freedom in a country established to maintain the racial status quo of white supremacy. This sense of activism was especially present in African Americans' quest for an education. Even before the end of the Civil War, enslaved people risked their lives to learn how to read and write because they realized the power of literacy (Anderson 1988; Moore 1971; Walker 1996; Williams 2005). Obtaining an education was the way for African Americans to rise above their predetermined station in life and reach for something better for themselves and future generations. Through education, African Americans would gain access to the same rights and liberties guaranteed to all Americans under the U.S. Constitution. On the surface this goal should have been within reach, but in reality, without coming together to advocate for improvements and changes in their educational condition, African Americans would have made little progress.

After the Civil War, Missouri was in the unique position of being a former slave state, similar to the states that fought for the Confederacy. As a border state, Missouri had a slightly more advanced attitude than its Southern cousins towards the education of African Americans (St. Louis Public Schools 1865). This attitude was influenced by members of the African American community in St. Louis, who came together to encourage the Board of Education of

the City of St. Louis to treat its African American students the same way it treated its White students. Years before *Plessey v. Ferguson* became the law of the land, African Americans in Missouri fought for equal educational resources and won (Bringham 1945; Day and Kedro 1974; Dowden-White 2011; Jack 2007; Moore 1971; Troen 1975).

In order to examine the role of African American citizens' councils in the fight for educational equality, this dissertation first examines a history of African American education in Missouri. This history focuses on how schools were developed in Missouri both before and after the Civil War and reflects legislative action as well as personal action by African Americans and Whites to create and maintain an educational system that served African Americans. The building of African American education in the state included efforts by Northern religious organizations, state lawmakers who legalized segregation and most importantly countless free and enslaved African Americans working outside societal boundaries to create change. The terms *African American*, *Colored*, *Negro*, and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout this narrative based on the time period and the referenced source.

Following the history of African American education in Missouri is a summary of three different African American citizens' councils and their influence on education in the St. Louis Public Schools. From the African American Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, created through the American Missionary Association (Richardson 1975), to the assistance provided to the "Exodusters" moving from the South to Kansas (Jack 2007), St. Louis has had a strong history of African Americans coming together to support African American causes. Through the work of the citizens' councils, the St. Louis African American community continued its tradition of working together to uplift all members of the race.

After developing the historical narratives of African American education in Missouri and the African American citizens' councils, this dissertation analyzes them using a combination of historical methodology and critical race theory as a form of critical policy analysis. The historical methodology reframes the narrative, placing African Americans at the center of their own stories and recognizing their role in advocating for change. The three citizens' councils are analyzed using critical race theory and examined to determine how their formation, actions, and success were related to the racial dynamics of the era. Through the merging of historical methodology and a race-based analysis, a more complete story of African American education in Missouri begins to unfold. This new narrative not only gives African Americans a central place in the story, but moves Missouri beyond its overlooked border state status to a more prominent role in African American education both before and after the Civil War.

### **African American Citizens' Councils**

An early instance of African Americans joining together to advocate for education in St. Louis occurred in 1864 with the creation of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, put in place to run the American Missionary Association (AMA) schools for Colored students. Free Colored men of St. Louis lobbied the AMA to allow them to run their own schools and eventually hire Colored teachers for their classrooms. In existence for a short period of time before being absorbed by the St. Louis Public Schools, this African American school board reflected the early advocacy efforts of African Americans to control their educational destinies (Evans 1938; Richardson 1975).

Following the dissolution of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, a series of educational advancements reflected the African American community's continued commitment to education. These advances included the hiring of African American teachers, the

creation of a Normal School at Lincoln Institute, the creation of Sumner High School, and the transition from numbered schools to schools named after African Americans (Gersman 1972; Kremer 1991; Leidecker 1941). These small victories sustained the community's will to continue fighting as they prepared their strategy to request a new high school.

The next instance of African American citizens advocating for educational equity came in 1907 with a request from the Colored Citizens' Council. This group of men sent a written appeal to the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis requesting not only a new location but a new building for Sumner High School. Named after Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, Sumner High School was founded in 1875 and was the first public high school west of the Mississippi for African Americans. The school was housed at the time in a rundown building in an undesirable section of town. The Colored Citizens' Council requested a new location, a new building, along with a rigorous curriculum, robust extracurricular activities, and improved teacher quality, all of the things that were present at the White schools (Colored Citizens 1907). After struggles with the school board and the White community, the group received all of the improvements it requested, and Sumner went on to become one of the best high schools in the country for students of any race (St. Louis Public Schools 1912).

The third instance of a citizens' group coming together occurred in the early 1920s as a result of overcrowding at Sumner High School. Many of the men involved in the Colored Citizens' Council continued their campaign for educational improvements by advocating for a new African American high school. This new group, the Central School Patrons Association, was led by the pastor of Central Baptist Church, George E. Stevens. Joined by the *St. Louis Argus*, the local African American newspaper, the Central School Patrons Association successfully lobbied for the building of a second public high school for African American

students, named after George B. Vashon, a graduate of Sumner High School (Stevens 1927; Stevens and McWhorter 1922).

The history of education in St. Louis illustrates that citizens' councils were successful in making large gains for the African American community. The three councils described above came together under the umbrella of citizens' councils because they were composed of men who worked together towards a shared purpose. As members of the citizens' councils, the men worked for years to make the promise of educational equity a reality. Through persistence and dedication, the citizens' councils labored diligently against every barrier they encountered. From lack of responses from the school board to hostile White neighborhood associations, the citizens' councils spent years fighting for their Constitutional right to an equal education. The work was not quick, but the results laid the foundation for future generations of African American students in St. Louis.

Through successful lobbying of the White power structure, African American citizens' councils were able to get new schools, enhanced curriculums, and professional development for teachers, all the things that were found in the White high schools. While other former slave states were restricting the education of African Americans, Missouri and specifically St. Louis seemed to be creating a system that was almost on par with that of Whites. Why were African Americans in St. Louis able to achieve such success for educational advancement? Was the success of African American citizens' councils in St. Louis part of a larger plan to maintain the racial status quo? What did the success of African American citizens' councils say about African American citizenship and advocacy during a time when African Americans were thought to have neither? Finally, how could their success be used today to advocate for African

American education as urban areas close schools, hire uncertified teachers, and devalue the cultural competency of African American students?

### **Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine African American citizens' councils in St. Louis between 1864 and 1927. Within this purpose the study has three objectives. The first is to show that African American citizens' councils were successful in securing positive change for African American students. The second objective is to determine why they were successful in St. Louis. The third objective is to determine what their efforts can tell us about African American agency, citizenship, and education in St. Louis during this period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### **Significance of This Study**

As the country continues to struggle with issues of racial inequality, this study contributes to the knowledge of African American educational advocacy. Building upon the groundbreaking works of authors such as James D. Anderson (1988), Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996), and Heather Andrea Williams (2005), this study continues to show that African Americans played an active role in advocating for educational parity. They were not helpless individuals waiting for White society to give them the tools for advancement. The African Americans involved in the citizens' councils in St. Louis took control of their own destinies and fought for the future of the community.

This study also contributes to the history of African American education in the country by focusing on Missouri. As a border state, Missouri was treated as a stepchild after the Civil War. Not sure if it was Northern because it was part of the Union or Southern because it sanctioned slavery, historians usually left Missouri out of the research all together when

investigating the reconstruction of the former slave states (Alvord 1866 Lang 2009. When Missouri was mentioned it was usually to focus on the creation of the first public kindergarten in the United States in 1873 or Sumner High School, the first public high school west of the Mississippi for African Americans. Missouri had a rich narrative of African American educational history that was waiting to be told and recognized. From John B. Meacham to Milton Morrison (M.M) Clark to George Stevens, the African American community in Missouri worked diligently to gain both access and control of their children's educational future. It is time the story was told.

In addition to contributing to the field of education and re-situating Missouri's place in educational history, this study introduces a new view of historical events by looking at them through the lens of critical race theory. While critical race theory has long been applied to the legal and education fields, it has only recently been used as a framework for examining historical events. Critical race theory opens up new avenues of explanations for the *why* and *how* behind events and encourages honest discussions on the role of race in history.

The application of critical race theory to historic educational environments and events provides a fresh lens from which to view these events. Policies and actions that were once seen as progress for African Americans are re-examined to uncover hidden agendas that maintain the racial status quo of white supremacy. By using critical race theory as a framework for historical milestones in African American education, this study questions whether the short-term interest of Whites was achieved at the long-term expense of African Americans.

After *Brown v. Board of Education*, there is little evidence of African Americans joining together in St. Louis to advocate for educational equity. There have been pockets of advocacy by temporary interracial coalitions who held a few meetings and made unsuccessful demands.

Or there were individuals who expressed their displeasure with the educational system, but did not have the resources and the strategy to move beyond shouting comments at public meetings. In the 1970s there was a flicker of action with the case of Minnie Liddell and the desegregation lawsuit that led to the voluntary transfer and magnet school programs. An example of the use of the legal system and interest convergence, these programs were not the answers to the city's mis-education of African American students. Instead of improving the educational opportunities for students, these programs, as some opponents argued, took the best African American students and sent them out of their neighborhoods to White schools that did not recognize their cultural assets (Morris 2009). Today's African American community in St. Louis could learn how to effectively advocate for educational equity by looking back in history to the work of the citizens' councils. By examining their structure and strategy, the community could develop a sustainable plan for tackling urban educational issues that would lead to success for the students and the community.

### **Research Design**

The research design used in my study is historical analysis. Through the collection and review of data from historical documents I interpreted specific historical events to examine the role of African American citizens' councils. The information found in the documents reflected qualitative and quantitative data that when woven together produced a narrative about the time period, its people, and the events.

The method of analysis used to examine the African American citizens' councils is critical race theory as a form of critical policy analysis. The fusion of these two theories allowed me to examine the historical events and to uncover hidden issues of race, even when visibly absent from the sources. In addition, the events were framed using historical revisionism, which



looks at past events and teases out themes of injustice and exploitation. In terms of education, this method has suggested that schools reinforce class inequities and social injustice (Douglas and Peck 2013; Howell and Prevenir 2001).

### **Data and Sources**

The data utilized in this study create a historical narrative of the work of African American citizens' councils. The data were collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources including literary, narrative, diplomatic, and social sources (Howell and Prevenir 2001). Conclusions drawn from this narrative were based on analysis in order to meet the purpose of the study and its three objectives.

### **Literary Sources**

African American newspapers played an important role in the fight for educational equality. Starting with *Freedom's Journal* published in 1827 out of New York City, African American newspapers promoted causes that would improve the status of the African American community. The newspaper's publishers gave voice to the community when they proclaimed, "We want to plead our own case. Too long have others spoken for us" (Roberts and Klibanoff 2007, 13). This idea of giving voice allowed for the stories of African Americans to be both visible in history and told from their own perspective.

Founded in 1905 as part of the Western Relief Association, the *St. Louis Argus* joined two other African American publications in St. Louis, the *St. Louis Palladium* and the *Central Afro-American*. These were only three of the fifty-four African American owned newspapers in Missouri that appeared before 1920. These newspapers represented almost 10 percent of the total of African American newspapers in the country during this time (Greene 2006). It is significant that Missouri had such a large percentage of the newspapers, but little has been

written on African American newspapers in the Midwest, and scholars instead have focused on the eastern and western regions of the country.

The African American newspapers in St. Louis flourished after World War I for reasons associated with the Great Migration that occurred during this time period. Though more than fifty years removed from slavery, African Americans in the South saw little progress in their path towards citizenship. In fact, after Reconstruction, the laws put in place by the South were as restrictive as those before the Civil War (Jack 2007; Wilkerson 2010). The lack of freedom along with the ever-present threat of violence pushed African Americans to flee across state borders for a better life. This better life was tied to education and economics, both reasons for the upsurge in African American newspapers in the early twentieth century. Not only could African Americans read the newspapers because of their access to education, but also they could afford to purchase them because they were working jobs that paid a living wage (O'Kelly 1982).

Since Missouri was a border state between the North and South, St. Louis newspapers played a role in the Great Migration of Southerners escaping the violence of the South, which as scholar Isabel Wilkerson (2010) notes was the ultimate form of resistance. The *St. Louis Argus* was particularly interested in the effects of the migration on the African American community in St. Louis and used this information to advocate for changes within the community (O'Kelly 1982). Instead of taking the minds of the community off their troubles, the African American press kept issues fresh in their minds so they would continue to work towards equality (Roberts and Klibanoff 2007).

Because of the importance of the *St. Louis Argus*, it was the primary literary source used in this study. As noted by historical researchers, newspaper articles are written to convey certain messages to their audiences (Howell and Prevenier 2001). This means they contain certain

biases. In the case of the *St. Louis Argus*, the specific audience was African Americans. This differed from earlier African American papers that were written for White audiences (O'Kelly 1982). Written for and by African Americans, the *St. Louis Argus* could be seen as trying to shape readers' opinions in favor of African American causes.

A second concern with the use of the *St. Louis Argus* has to do with the authors of the articles and editorials. In most cases, there were no signed news articles or editorials. There is no way of knowing if the writers observed the actual events or if they were writing from secondhand accounts. This brings into question the internal validity of the *St. Louis Argus*. If we don't know the articles' authors, it is hard to determine if they were in a position to know what they reported. Also, what was an author's intention in writing an article or editorial, and were the authors reliable?

A third concern with the *St. Louis Argus* has to do with the competence of the observer. Because it was an African American newspaper using African American writers, some cultural bias would necessarily appear in their reporting, especially on issues of race. How did these biases play out in the accuracies of the articles, and did the writers bring certain racial assumptions to their reporting? For example, if the editors believed White people in St. Louis were racist, this belief would inform any articles or editorials on issues being covered, whether the articles explicitly dealt with race or not.

In addition to the *St. Louis Argus*, other African American newspapers that covered African American issues were used to collect data. These sources, because they were African American newspapers, have many of the same internal validity concerns associated with the *St. Louis Argus*. Regardless of the concerns associated with the use of newspapers, I believe these African American newspapers serve as a credible voice of the African American community.

My belief is based in the method of historical revisionism and its foundation of looking back at history using a different lens. In other words, I believe it is inappropriate to judge the validity of the *St. Louis Argus* according to criteria developed for and by a field that traditionally silenced the voices of others.

The second literary source used to create my historical narrative was the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Founded in 1878 by Joseph Pulitzer through the merging of two newspapers, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was considered a liberal newspaper, catering to White audiences. In 1907, its founder penned its famous platform that remains displayed in the building's lobby. He says of the paper:

I know that my retirement will make no difference in its cardinal principles, that it will always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing news, always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty.

As the self-proclaimed liberal paper in town, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* suffered from many of the same internal validity issues mentioned above for the *St. Louis Argus*. Written by Whites for the White community, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* had clear motives and wrote to shape public opinion on issues of race. One example was the February 28th editorial in opposition to the 1916 segregation law that prevented African Americans from moving outside of prescribed residential boundaries. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* echoed the *St. Louis Argus*'s cries to voters to strike down this unfair law. Because the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* did not employ African Americans

and depended solely on White reporters, their ability to know about what they reported called into question the competency of their reporting. Similar to the African American reporters at the *St. Louis Argus*, the White reporters at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* had assumptions about race, and these assumptions colored their reporting, even if this bias was not immediately evident.

### **Narrative Sources**

The narrative sources used were biographies and autobiographies. Sometimes known as “ego” documents, these sources reflect the authors’ perceptions of and memory of events. These types of sources allow for insight into the ideology and culture of the specific time period. In addition to biographies and autobiographies, my narrative sources included personal journals and diaries (Howell and Prevenier 2001).

The ego documents stand up to some internal validity questions because the authors were usually in a position to know the events of which they were writing. That being said, authors may also misrepresent their participation in events to elevate their status and enhance their legacy. In order to account for the authenticity of the narrative being told, I performed an external criteria check. This was done by cross-checking an author’s description of events against other sources mentioned in the beginning of this section. Without such verification, I would have found it difficult to determine the correct version of events from the author’s wishful memory (Howell and Prevenier 2001).

### **Diplomatic Sources**

Due to the historic nature of the study, it was hard to locate many diplomatic sources, if any existed at all. Simply defined, diplomatic sources “document an existing legal situation or create a new one” (Howell and Prevenier 2001). In the case of the African American citizens’ councils, if they were a legal entity, they would have a charter that designated them as a legal

entity. An example of a charter used in this study was the constitution for the creation of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools. This constitution was a legal document that secured the rights and responsibilities of the board in regards to the management of the schools. Because of their legal nature, the diplomatic sources were not subject to questions of internal validity such as authorship, intentions, and assumptions. Instead, they were checked for authenticity by comparing them with local or state records that recorded legal documents.

### **Social Documents**

This study relies on two types of social documents, school district records and personal letters. Both of these types of documents are the result of record keeping by organizations to produce an account of events that occurred. Because of the time period being studied, some of these social documents are handwritten and contain language that is unfamiliar or different from usage today. The documents were firmly placed within a time and place to help confirm their authenticity (Howell and Prevenier 2001).

Similar to the newspaper articles and editorials, some of the school district records and personal letters could not be attributed to specific authors. This lack of authorship calls into question many of the internal and external issues of validity already associated with other sources. In addition to such issues, the genesis of the documents is brought into question. With bureaucratic reports, it is difficult to determine the type of author even when one is listed. For example, consider a school district report from the mid-1880s. The author of the report is listed, and his title is Assistant Superintendent of Instruction. There are three different types of authors he could be. Is he the person who conceptualized the report and requested its creation (intellectual author)? Is he the person who signed his name because it carried authority or influence (juridical author)? Is he purely the scribe who drafted the document and put it in its

proper form (material author)? (Howell and Prevenier 2001.) Without knowing the document's genesis, I found it hard to determine if the author was in a position to know what he reported and hard to determine what role he played in the document's creation.

### **Analytical Procedures**

Before examining the specific African American citizens' councils, I analyzed the history of African American education in St. Louis using historical revisionism. This method of analysis provides the appropriate context for the study of the citizens' councils using critical race theory. This framework mirrors the method used by other historians studying African American events and their relationship to the larger field of mainstream U.S. history. The works of these scholars served as historical models for this research study (Blackmon 2008; Walker 1996; Wilkerson 2010).

My study reflects similar works undertaken by historians and journalists. Douglas Blackmon's (2008) *Slavery by Another Name* uncovers the continuation of slavery in the South under the peonage system. In her book *The Warmth of Other Suns* Isabel Wilkerson (2010) takes her readers on the journey of the Great Migration through the accounts of three African Americans who left the South for a better life in the North and West. Finally, Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) in *Their Highest Potential* examines the educational life of Caswell County Training School from the 1930s to its closing in 1969. Using the primary and secondary documents listed in previous sections, the authors of these works construct a microhistory within a historical narrative, which moves the story of African Americans from the edges of history to the center, a place that recognizes their agency in their struggle for freedom.

***Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II***

Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name* uses the story of Green Cottenham to illustrate how African Americans in the South were re-enslaved after the end of Reconstruction. As part of the agreement to end the war, the Confederacy states were put under Reconstruction, which was a way to ensure African Americans had the opportunities granted to them in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. After twelve years under the watchful eyes of the Northern states, the Southern states took back control of their governments and dismantled any laws that promoted African American equality. It was during this time period that the peonage system was developed and put in place by Southern Whites to replace the free slave labor they had lost (Blackmon 2008).

The peonage system used the legal system to make the smallest of crimes committed by African Americans punishable by hard work at labor camps. These labor camps rented out the prisoners to work at nearby farms, on chain gangs building the country's transportation system, and in the iron and coal mines. Similar to today's *driving while Black* analogy for racial profiling, the crimes committed by African Americans back then could be considered *walking while Black*. Many of the men (and some women) were accused of vagrancy because they could not prove they were employed. In addition to unemployment, which was a crime, the crimes included asking for a receipt at the store (this showed a lack of trust in Whites) and trying to escape the South and the new slavery (Blackmon 2008).

Blackmon reconstructed Cottenham's story through records discovered in old courthouses, county jails, storage sheds, and local historical societies. These records uncovered the hidden story of continued slavery that was repackaged by Southern Whites to maintain their access to free labor. Blackmon conveyed the far reach of the peonage system by assembling



together narratives from various states and looking at them as a whole instead of as individual occurrences. By making one collective narrative of singular events, Blackmon could let a wider story unfold and discover patterns. These patterns helped him question history's account of social and anthropological shifts as the cause of the peonage system, when a careful examination of the records showed the cause to be decisions made by White individuals in order to preserve their way of life (Blackmon 2008).

*Slavery by Another Name* gives voice to the countless African American men who suffered and died under a new system of slavery while the federal government turned a blind eye. Blackmon, surprised by all of the information available on the Whites involved in the system, turned his attention to the African Americans and gave them a voice at the center of their own narrative. The story of re-enslavement through peonage represents yet another event in America's history that was given a mere footnote. Douglas Blackmon's research discloses the truth about the peonage system and gives voice to Green Cottenham, a symbol of the African American voices omitted from their own stories.

### ***The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration***

During the time peonage was happening in the South, African Americans began their movement north. Starting before World War I, more than six million African Americans fled the South in search of a better life. Isabel Wilkerson explores this sweeping change of the Southern landscape in her book *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. A journalist by training, Wilkerson employs historical methodology to frame her narrative. Using questions to help guide her research, she asks about the migration's timeframe, location, and most importantly who the people were behind the demographics. Keeping these questions in

mind, she weaves together the oral histories of three Southern migrants to represent the experiences of the whole (Wilkerson 2010).

In addition to the oral histories, Wilkerson utilizes primary sources such as newspapers and federal and state records to add depth to the story as well as to clarify the accounts given in oral interviews. While my research does not involve oral histories, my historical method of creating a microhistory is very similar to that of Wilkerson. Though she does not use the language of a historian, her work takes the story of the Great Migration and gives African Americans a voice by putting their story at the center of America's immigration story. As she states, "It has most often been consigned to the landscape, rarely in the foreground" (Wilkerson 2010, 29). She mentions the historical accounts of other immigrant groups and the scholarly attention given to their stories of survival and prosperity in their new land. In her research she takes a revisionist view of history by applying an immigrant lens to African Americans who moved from the South to areas that were as different to them as the United States was to new immigrants (Wilkerson 2010).

Similar to my study, Wilkerson's narrative also uses African American newspapers as an important source. Newspaper accounts reveal the real reasons why migrants left the South. Through newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* Wilkerson was able to find the uncensored voices of the migrants. Many of the scholarly works she reviewed gave financial and educational reasons for the migration from the South, but African American newspapers exposed the horrors of Southern violence as migrants told stories of fleeing their homes in the middle of the night to escape the White man's noose.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, African American newspapers played an important role in the African American community during this time period largely due to segregation and

lack of access to other forms of media such as radio and later television. The newspapers also predicted the vast size of the migration through the daily letters they received asking for assistance either moving north or once they arrived in the North. This prediction is evident in a 1918 editorial in the *St. Louis Argus* that explained the overcrowding at Sumner High School as a result of permanent migration, and not the seasonal migration claimed by the school board (“Overcrowding at Sumner High School” 1918). The African American newspapers moved the story of African American migration from the edges of the U.S. immigration movement to its center as the largest migration the country had ever seen (Wilkerson 2010).

***Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South***

While Wilkerson writes about African Americans who chose to leave the South, Vanessa Siddle Walker focuses on those who chose to stay. Her book *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (1996) examines the segregated Caswell County Training School from its opening in 1934 to its closing in 1969. Through interviews with staff and alumni along with school records, Walker tells the story of a successful segregated school that pushed students past the prescribed White societal expectations to reach their highest potential. In order to reconstruct this narrative of success, Walker utilizes historical ethnography, a historical method that is a model for the work of Blackmon and Wilkerson, as well as my own project.

For her study, Walker defines historical ethnography in two parts. The first part looks at “providing a cultural understanding of an environment from the perspective of the environment’s participants (Walker 1996, 221). Since she was looking at a segregated environment, her focus was on the African Americans within the environment with little concern for the White community. This lack of concern for Whites did not mean she did not recognize that this

environment was created because of the actions of Whites, but they were never the center of the segregated school story. In contrast, Blackmon and Wilkerson emphatically state that the purpose of their narratives is to move their African American protagonists to the center of the story and give them a long overdue voice. All three authors recognize the role of race in the historical environments they have chosen to study, but unlike my study, they do not attempt to analyze the environment according to a race-based theory such as critical race theory.

The second part of Walker's definition deals with history and the fact that since the environment no longer exists, she must recreate it. In order to perform this re-creation, she pays close "attention to chronology and context, in the tradition of the historian" (Walker 1996, 21). This chronological retelling of historical events is found in *Slavery by Another Name* and *The Warmth of Other Suns* as well as in my research on African American citizens' councils. Starting with the history of education after the Civil War and moving to the final building of Vashon High School in 1927, my study chronicles the development of African American citizens' councils as these groups worked to improve educational opportunities for African American students.

Because her research focuses on the school environment, Walker relies heavily on school records to gather information about the school, the staff, the students, and the environment. Even though the period she is studying commences after mine ends, they share similarities in the type of information available in school records. Both school communities (St. Louis and Caswell County) were segregated, but were overseen by White school boards. This fact provides an interesting look at how African American teachers and students were perceived by the White community. Similar to the creation of the new Sumner High School, Walker (1996, 47) cites African American community members attending a school board meeting in order to request a

new school. The minutes from the meeting describe “patrons of the Yanceyville colored school” but make no mention of their arguments for a new school. This description, along with the response, is different from what was recorded for the White community members who attended the meeting and requested both new schools and school improvements.

Similar to Caswell County’s request for a new African American high school, the African American citizens’ council presented a request to the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis requesting a new Sumner High School. The records from the school board meetings for that year (1907) did not record any type of presentation, but they did finally show that the board voted the following year to build a new African American high school for \$313,000, less than half the cost of the new white high school (Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis 1908).

These brief examples highlight the importance of school records in shedding light on the educational climate for African American students during specific times in history. In addition to numerical data, they provide a window into the racial thoughts of the White school board members though these thoughts are not explicitly stated. Through the words the writers of these reports chose to use to describe African American teachers and staff accomplishments as well as the absence of certain African American school events, what was noted in the records tells as much of a story as what was left out. It is the absence of such narratives in documents that makes sources such as African American newspapers necessary to present a more complete historical picture.

### **Research Model**

My research model combines historical analysis with critical race theory. As shown by the works above, this type of methodology is fairly common in creating historical narratives.

Through the use of newspapers, state and local records, and church archives, I created a chronological narrative of African American citizens' councils in St. Louis between 1864 and 1927. What makes my study different from those referenced above is the analysis of the historical events using critical race theory. This theory allowed me to uncover and unpack ideas of racial motivations and bias related to the historical events if any could be found. The use of critical race theory to analyze historical events and determine patterns of race-based decision making and behavior introduced me to a new way of looking at history from both sides of the color line.

### **Historical Revisionism**

Historical methods of research have transitioned from the early years that focused on the theory of great men found in the Annales School to the historical revisionism that questions the very acts and men that were considered great. Each time a new phase of study emerges, it really is just another way of observing and recording change over time. These changes are reflected in the traditional historical interpretations that have led up to historical revisionism (Howell and Prevenier 2001).

Historical revisionism questions the accepted mainstream views of history by uncovering themes of injustice and exploitation. Following the New Left, a movement born out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, historical revisionism has elaborated on issues of inequality and justice (Howell and Prevenier 2001). In terms of the educational system, it specifically states that schools reinforce class structures by teaching the dominant culture's ideologies to maintain the status quo. In other words, schools are vehicles to ensure that certain groups of people remain at the top of the hierarchy by keeping others at the bottom (Reese and Rury 2008).

This definition of historical revisionism served as the foundation from which I examined African American education in St. Louis. By looking at the history of African American education as both unjust and unequal, I could make an argument for the necessity of African American citizens' councils. The councils were developed to push back against a system that worked against African Americans and their progress through educational attainment.

One of the earliest injustices was the lack of African American involvement in decision making for the schools. Whites created schools for African Americans, but still controlled the teacher placement, curriculum, and location. A second injustice was the quality of the facilities, curriculum, and teaching staff at Sumner High School. These educational requirements were vital for achieving a successful learning environment. The final injustice was the overcrowding of Sumner High School, which led to the new Vashon High School. While the African American population in the city grew, the school system did not try to accommodate their needs and instead tried to keep them confined to a single high school while building numerous high schools for White students.

Once I had established the historical foundation of African American education in St. Louis, the next step was analyzing the African American citizens' councils using critical race theory. The analysis was based on critical policy analysis, which serves as a structure for the five tenets of critical race theory. This analysis allowed the concept of race to be introduced in the historical narrative of education in St. Louis.

### **Critical Policy Analysis**

Critical policy analysis produced a historical narrative that revealed the long-term social interactions between African Americans and Whites in the education system. In addition to the interactions, the narrative explained how Whites dominated the system at the expense of African

Americans. Finally, it showed how African Americans through the use of the citizens' councils adjusted the educational system to meet their needs without disturbing the entire system (Brewer 2012).

In order to understand critical policy analysis it is important to recognize cultural histories and microhistories. Both types of histories work together to give the silent minority a voice. No longer are authors able to choose what events or people to record in order to shape history along a certain path. All actors are provided with the ability to effect change regardless of the status of their personhood (Brewer 2012; Howell and Prevenier 2001).

Cultural histories allow historians to determine how "discursive spaces" are assembled in a way that allows subordination to occur. Put another way, they explain how conditions were created in a particular historical moment that facilitated the establishment of resistance (Brewer 2012). In the case of this study, what conditions were present in St. Louis during these specific time periods that allowed African American citizens' councils to come into existence and achieve success?

African American citizens' councils represent a microhistory in the grand narrative of African American education in St. Louis. The most present narrative around African American education in St. Louis is the story of Sumner High School, "the first high school for African Americans west of the Mississippi" (Dowden-White 2011; Heathcott 2005; Lang 2009; Stevens 1927; Williams 1920). The story of Sumner's success has been told and retold in a way that Marx describes as showing no causality. The ultimate success of Sumner High School was due to the tensions placed on the system by the citizens' councils, a fact that is absent from the accepted narrative about the school (Howell and Prevenier 2001).



Microhistories shifted the narrative center to the people who had been pushed to history's edge. In this case, the microhistories of the citizens' councils moved them to the center of the story about Sumner High School and other St. Louis educational milestones in which their contribution had been erased. Their stories dealt with the ambiguities of personhood that occurred when identity was framed in connection with a group. This idea was even more tenuous due to the lack of personhood experienced by African Americans both legally and socially. Through the use of microhistories, the stories of the citizens' councils showed that African Americans were not supporting players in the fight for educational equity, but main characters.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Founded in the writings of legal scholars, critical race theory serves as a way of uncovering the hidden consequence of race in a society that believes it has solved its race problems. In its definition, racism is not an individual performing a singular act, but a system of white privilege that is tied to the distribution of social, political, and economic resources (Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Douglass Horsford 2011; Ladson-Billings 1998). Beyond this definition, critical race theory explains through its five tenets how racism remains a characteristic of American life.

The first tenet is the permanence of racism and how it has been woven into the fabric of society. It is so embedded that it is virtually invisible, and those in power want to keep it that way. When racism is unrecognizable, it is easier to allow the racial status quo to continue unchallenged. Society has become so accustomed to racism that it has become silent standard operating procedure. Critical race theory recognizes racism and brings it to light for others to

see, whether they choose to do something about it or not (Bell 1992; Delgado 1995; Duncan 2005; Ladson-Billings 1998).

The next tenet is a critique of liberalism and specifically the legal system. Many people believe that dramatic strides have been made in the country's racial climate because of court cases and the passing of equal rights legislation. But instead of propelling the country forward in terms of race relations, the legal system serves to slow it down. Focusing purely on the laws, critical race theorists believe the legal system does not allow for the quick and immediate change required for the eradication of racism. Aimed at both liberals and conservatives, this argument challenges the legal system's ability to create real and lasting change to the embedded racial hierarchy (Bell 1980; Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Ladson-Billings 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995).

Legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010) alludes to the use of the judicial system to maintain and reinforce the current racial status quo. In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* she discusses "preservation through transformation," which means that Whites have been able to preserve their position at the top of the racial hierarchy by changing the rules and rhetoric of the game. For Alexander's purposes, she uses the example of slavery, Jim Crow, and the mass incarceration of African Americans. Though these occurrences happened in different time periods, they have one thing in common, the containment of African Americans. When slavery was abolished, the courts established Jim Crow through its decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson*. When "separate but equal" was struck down by *Brown v. Board of Education* and the dawn of the civil rights movement was approaching, the groundwork was being laid in the courts for the next way to control African Americans, mass incarceration (Alexander 2010).

Even when an action has a positive effect on alleviating racism, it is usually due to the third tenet, interest convergence. In other words, Whites promote racial remedies if they receive some benefit from the deal. This idea is best described by legal scholar Derrick Bell (2004), who explains that the “interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interest of Whites in policy making decisions” (69). In other words, Whites will not give and Blacks will not win their rights because it is the right thing to do or because of some higher moral and ethical issues. In order for Whites to give an inch, they have to receive a yard in return (Bell 1980; Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Douglass Horsford 2011; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lipsitz 2011).

Since the founding of the United States, whiteness and property have been explicity linked together to erect an impermeable barrier between Whites and non-Whites. The fourth tenet of critical race theory explores the idea of property and how whiteness became a form of property that allows for unlimited and unchallenged access to resources. Whether it is education, real estate, or employment, whiteness is an intangible asset that supports the current racial hierarchy that has permitted Whites to remain at the top (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Douglass Horsford 2011; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lipsitz 2011; Williams 2005).

Similar to the permanence of racism, whiteness as property is transferable through generations, so it continues to perpetuate itself in every proceeding generation. DeCuir-Gunby (2006) goes even deeper by explaining that whiteness allows for not only the right to property, but the right to positive unearned reputations and the right to exclude others. Joined together with transference, whiteness becomes a valuable piece of property, an intangible power that Whites have gone to any lengths to keep from losing (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Lipsitz 2011).

The final tenet of critical race theory provides an opportunity for the voice of others to be heard and recognized as a credible base of knowledge. Counter-storytelling serves as a vehicle for the oppressed to tell their experiences and serve as experts of their own lives. This alternative reality is in direct conflict with the idea of Whiteness as the normative factor from which all things are judged right or wrong (Solorzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso 2005). The experiences of people of color are neither abnormal nor deficient and should be viewed as a way of understanding the world through a different lens and the first step on the road to a more just society for all (Delpit 1988; Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995).

In this project the tenets of critical race theory were used when analyzing the historical narratives associated with African American citizens' councils and their success in achieving academic gains for students. The use of critical race theory allowed for race to be introduced into the historical narrative of education in a way that had not been done before. Using the five tenets, I carefully analyzed the African American citizens' councils and their role in education beyond basic issues of Black vs. White. The concept of counter-storytelling did not receive its own section or chapter in the research because the entire research project serves as a counter-story to the mainstream beliefs about African American advocacy. The counter-stories are found in the narratives of the three citizens' councils and the African American community that labored to help them achieve their goals. Through utilization of critical race theory, this study moves African American citizens' councils beyond traditional historical narratives and into a space that reflects the racial realities they worked to overcome.

### **Delimitations**

This study involves citizens' councils made up of African Americans from St. Louis, Missouri, between 1864 and 1927. The councils were composed of all males and included

religious, political, and educational figures. The citizens' councils were organized, but they did not all have charters documenting their official existence. Instead their existence was verified through the documents they created. These documents include a constitution for the Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, a complaint by the Colored Citizens' Council of St. Louis, and a formal resolution by the Central School Patrons Association. There were many times during the course of this period when African Americans came together to support African American issues. This study focuses purely on public education, but does not dismiss the importance of African American agency in other social and political arenas.

### **Definitions**

**Border States:** The four slave states that did not secede from the Union. They include Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and Delaware.

***Oliver Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al.:*** The 1954 case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court that overturned state laws allowing school segregation based on race.

**Citizens' Councils:** African American citizens who voluntarily came together to support and advocate for educational equity in public schools for African American students.

***Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sanford:*** The 1857 legal case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court that determined that African Americans, enslaved or free, were not citizens of the United States and therefore did not receive the rights and guarantees provided by the U.S. Constitution.

**Elleardsville "The Ville":** A neighborhood located Northwest of downtown St. Louis that was a thriving African American community in the early 1900s. The neighborhood boundaries were St. Louis Avenue on the North, Easton Avenue on the South, Sarah on the East, and Taylor on the West.

**Normal School:** A teacher preparatory school for African Americans.

***Homer A. Plessy v. John H. Ferguson:*** The 1896 case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court that legalized segregation based on race.

**Positive Change:** In regards to citizens' councils, changes that created increased opportunities for African American success. These changes included better school facilities, hiring of African American teachers and principals, teacher professional development, and enhanced curriculums.

**Race:** A socially and historically constructed ideological system that permeates all social, cultural, economic, and political domains, and thus a major determinant of power.

**Racism:** Systems, structures, and customs that uphold and sustain oppressive group relationships, status, income, and educational attainment.

**White Privilege:** The notion that White subjects accrue advantages by virtue of being constructed as Whites.

## **Summary**

The remainder of this study is organized into seven chapters. The second and third chapters provide a historical narrative of African American education in St. Louis, with an emphasis on the three African American citizens' councils. Using significant court cases on African American citizenship rights, the fourth chapter provides the social and political environment of St. Louis during the time period of each of the first two citizens' councils. The third council and its accompanying cases are covered in chapter five due to the local nature of the case. The sixth and seventh chapters expand upon critical race theory and specifically focus on cultural capital and interest convergence and their influence on the work of the councils. The final chapter examines the work of the citizens' councils in light of current educational issues in St. Louis and makes recommendations for future study.

## **Chapter 2: African American Education in St. Louis until 1900**

Towards the end of the Civil War in 1864, M. Oliver, the ex-officio Superintendent of Common Schools in Missouri, delivered a report before the state senate. In this report, Oliver spoke of the pending emancipation of Missouri's slave population and the citizenship issues that would need to be addressed. Among the issues most pressing on his mind was that of education and its connection to creating "fit" citizens. According to Oliver, "The aids and advantages of education must be extended for to offer a boon, the boon of citizenship, if they will be so prepared to receive it (Missouri State Senate Journal 1864).

Before the state of Missouri decided to address the issue of African American education, free and enslaved men and women had been addressing it for years regardless of the 1847 law prohibiting such acts (Brigham 1945; Evans 1938). Through clandestine Sunday schools and outright defiance, the African American population was becoming literate in preparation for the day they would be free of the chains of bondage and able to obtain citizenship (Bellamy 1973 Day and Kedro 1974; Williams 2005). Many of the accounts of early education for African Americans were developed through a White paternalistic lens that described education as a gift that was given to African Americans by generous White benefactors (Anderson 1988; Bellamy 1974; Williams 1920; Williams 2005). This racially tinged narrative was particularly apparent in the development of educational systems in the South, including former slave states such as Missouri.

Missouri was technically a border state, and its culture, both socially and politically, favored that of its Southern cousins. Described by a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* journalist as "closer in geography to Dixie than the realm of the Yankee" (Lang 2009), Missouri had formal and informal laws that reflected its stringent beliefs in segregation and the racial inferiority of

African Americans, both free and enslaved (Bellamy 1974; Primm 1998). But even in this racially restrictive environment, African Americans found the power to work together on educational issues, an important step in their path towards citizenship.

### **American Missionary Association**

The American Missionary Association (AMA) was a Northern-based organization that considered themselves “Christian Abolitionists” (Richardson 1975). The AMA advocated for full citizenship rights for African Americans and even went so far as to claim that the cause of the Civil War was God’s anger over the unequal treatment of African Americans. The AMA worked in Southern states by sending White missionaries to set up and run schools for the African American population. The AMA arrived in Missouri in the early 1860s, but did not begin developing schools until 1863 (Day and Kedro 1974; Richardson 1975).

The first school developed by the AMA in St. Louis was housed in Ebenezer Church on Washington Avenue. Opened in May 1863 with funding from a local merchant, the school started with fifty students, but could accommodate up to four hundred. On the third day of school, with sixty students in attendance, White residents quickly burned the school down because they were opposed to the idea of educational opportunities for African Americans. This setback did not deter the AMA, and it continued to hold classes in other churches and even at a nearby hotel to accommodate the African Americans’ thirst for knowledge. This desire for an education was recognized by J. L. Richardson, an early AMA staff member, who commented in letters on his students’ desire to become literate (Richardson 1975).

In May of 1863, the AMA sent George Candee, a Northern White minister, to St. Louis as the new superintendent of schools. In early letters from his new post, Candee described the conditions in St. Louis as difficult as he tried to accommodate more than four hundred students



in the hotel that served as the school until they were able to find a more suitable site. In his opening paragraph he optimistically stated, concerning the possibility of a new school building, that he had “hope now of getting one from the military” (Candee 1863a). If a school was not found soon, he proposed that the teachers be sent home until a suitable school could be acquired.

One month after arriving in St. Louis, Candee continued to request assistance in securing a proper school site, again requesting that his teachers be sent home until one was found. Sounding exasperated, he started off the letter by asking if the AMA had received his previous two letters. The remaining letters of 1863 contained continued requests for money and updates on his weakening health and that of his family. At one point he moved his family across the river to Illinois, but returned to St. Louis to continue his work with the AMA (Candee 1863d).

The AMA requested monthly reports from each of its schools to track basic descriptive data such as number of students, age of students, gender, and number of days in a school session. Looking at examples of monthly reports from schools in St. Louis and Kansas City in 1864 and 1865, we can derive more than statistical information from the questions asked of the schools (American Free School Monthly Report 1864 and 1865). It was this information that helped provide insight into the AMA and its belief about African Americans and Southern Whites.

In the monthly report of the AMA’s American Free School of St. Louis in 1864, the data reported that there were about 100 students with about 62 females and 42 males. The average attendance was 63 with the largest attendance during the session being 72. The school had been open for approximately eight months at the time of this report. Of the 104 students, all but 5 could read and spell while 54 studied mental arithmetic, 10 studied geography, and 28 could write (American Free School Monthly Report 1864).

The academic achievement of the students could be seen as significant during this time period because many of them were the children of former slaves, many of whom were illiterate due to the 1847 law forbidding the teaching of slaves. The school population may have been mostly the children of former slaves because free African Americans frowned upon sending their children to school with former slaves. However, even though education was illegal for slaves, many free African Americans had set up schools in defiance of the law, which may also account for the high level of literacy in the school (Kremer et al. 1993; Primm 1998; Richardson 1975).

Looking back at the monthly report from April 26, 1864, we find a few questions that stand out as providing more than statistical data. The first question has to do with whether or not singing or needlepoint was taught in the schools. The inclusion of a singing class is baffling since the association between African Americans and singing during this time would have been more closely tied to the enslaved community and not the free community. It would have also been more closely tied to plantation life of which Missouri had very little, so little in fact that at the end of the Civil War, there were only 115,000 slaves to emancipate in the entire state (Burke 2010; Primm 1998; Richardson 1975).

The second question from the 1864 monthly report that stands out is, "Do the mulattoes show any more capacity than the blacks?" The author of the report answered that there was a difference in opinion among the school's staff, but "I think not" (American Free School Monthly Report 1864). By asking this question of its staff, the AMA was trying either to prove or to disprove White racial superiority. In its philosophical teachings, the AMA believed that African Americans should be citizens and have all of the rights of White citizens, but nowhere did the AMA mention that African Americans were equal to Whites.

In fact, a question found in the 1865 American Free School monthly report from Kansas City exposes the AMA's attitude towards Southern Whites and their belief that as Northern Whites, they were superior to their brethren below the Mason Dixon line. The final question in the report asks, "Do the colored scholars show equal capacity with the Whites?\*" The comment next to the asterisk reads, "As compared with Whites in northern Schools" (American Free School Monthly Report 1865). In other words, the Colored scholars' achievements were to be compared with those of Northern Whites because that provided a higher academic bar than comparing them with Southern Whites.

The question of achievement compared with Northern Whites along with the question about the capacity of mulatto students compared with African American students exposes the AMA's hidden beliefs about African Americans and the paternalistic role the organization played in uplifting the race. Even though the teachers in St. Louis and Kansas City stated that the mulatto children did not show more capacity than the African American students, the presence of the question begs for deeper examination. Taken at a deeper level, it confirms the views of some scholars (Anderson 1988; Williams 2005) of the AMA as being paternalistic towards African Americans and believing they were incapable of running their own schools.

Based on the letters from George Candee to the AMA National Offices in New York, the educational environment in Missouri appeared different from that found deeper into the Southern states. While Candee was described by some as being incompetent, sickly, unwilling to work with African Americans, and downright unfit to serve as the AMA superintendent in St. Louis (Evans 1938; Richardson 1975; Williams 2005), his letters show him working with the free African American community to help them establish their own school board to run the schools.

In February of 1864, Candee wrote of his effort to secure a school board for the AMA school as being “more and more important.” Through the implementation of a school board, Candee believed he could obtain “harmony and cooperation” from the African American community. Before his latest trip outside of the city, Candee attended a meeting with three African American men who were charged to “select the best seven colored men and three White men who could organize themselves into a board” and begin operating immediately. This lack of a democratic process for selecting the board was brought up at the public meeting meant to adopt the new board’s constitution. Instead of ending the meeting with a new board, Candee was forced start over again, this time with more community involvement (Candee 1864c).

This demand by the African American community for involvement in the selection of the board members reflects their desire to be actively involved in educational decisions. This act of defiance against the White superintendent, Candee, and the AMA illustrates an advocacy that is absent from many narratives concerning the work of the AMA. It is only after carefully reading the correspondence between Candee and the African American board members and teachers that one can see the story of activism begin to emerge.

Continuing his efforts to establish a school board, Candee called another public meeting. At this meeting a committee of ten Colored men were appointed who were given the charge to select three White men to act with them and arrange themselves into a board (Candee 1864d). The African American men selected for the board included four pastors of “influential churches,” two “influential preachers,” and “other most influential men.” With a total of fourteen men, the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was established on April 12, 1864.

### **The Constitution of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools**

After first acknowledging God's role in the emancipation of millions from "barbarous oppression," the new St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools set upon the work of "removing the educational disabilities of the colored people." Through the development of a constitution, the board set out to define its purpose as well as how it would operate in this new post-Civil War society (St. Louis Board 1864 ).

As mentioned above, the members of the school board were appointed at a mass meeting held in March for such a purpose. This concept of appointment mirrored an election process that allowed the city's African American citizens to have a voice in their representation on the school board. Even though they did not yet have the right to vote, this selection process allowed African Americans this most basic right of citizenship through other means.

The basic purpose of the school board was to establish a system of "free and graded schools" in St. Louis as well as throughout the state for all Colored children. In order to fulfill this purpose, the school board was granted the power to hire staff, manage the finances, and provide the children with the necessary items for learning including books and clothes (St. Louis Board 1864). These powers granted to the school board reflect the powers of today's school boards more than 150 years later.

Anticipating future legislation that required the state to pay for the education of all its children, the new St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools stated that its funds would be used as indicated above until such time arrived. Once the state began financing the schools, the school board's assets would be liquidated and the money used for educational purposes as determined by three fourths of the board. The idea of school finances came up again at the end of the constitution when the school board spoke of the injustice of double taxation on African Americans (St. Louis Board 1864; Anderson 1988; Walker, 1996; Williams 2005).

At the time of its commencement, the school board had four schools with 300 students, one superintendent, and six teachers. Because of financial reasons, the AMA and the school board both supported the financing of the staff with the AMA paying the salaries and the school board providing room and board. The staff also received rations from the government to supplement their salaries (St. Louis Board 1864).

With an eye towards increased African American educational participation, the school board anticipated growing their operations to fulfill future needs. This growth model included additional classroom space, better facilities, and more teachers, all secured through financial contributions from local and national benefactors. Returning to the subject of school funding, the school board included a call to action to the state to utilize school taxes to fund schools for all of the children of the state (St. Louis Board 1864).

The state board praised the African American community for finding the funds to support their schools while the state collected their taxes and gave them to White schools. But the time for justice had arrived, and the school board took the state to task for its past inequities by asking the state officials how they expected people in poverty to pay for their own schools when they didn't require those with affluence to do the same thing. Now that the Civil War was over, African Americans should expect to receive the benefits of citizenship and one of these benefits was a free education paid for by the state (St. Louis Board 1864).

The constitution ended with both an appeal and hope for better futures for African Americans. The school board asked not only for supportive financial benefactors in St. Louis and Missouri but for the support of the "American public generally to the efforts of our colored people for their education and elevation." This constitution and specifically this new school board composed of African Americans foreshadowed a new "order of things for the colored

man.” With the shackles of slavery removed, now was the time for the country to assist in the uplift of its newest citizens (St. Louis Board 1864). Signed by President M. Morrison Clark and Recording Secretary William N. Evans, this constitution countered the national narrative of the AMA’s paternalistic role in African American education by placing African Americans in control of their own educational institutions.

### **The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools**

The newly established St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was made up of ten free African American men and four Caucasian men. Reflected in the board’s constitution, this group was assembled with the assistance of the African American community and was responsible for the financial and academic oversight of the AMA Freedom Schools Society (St. Louis Board 1864). As mentioned in one of Candee’s letters, the African American men on the board were respected leaders in the African American community. Out of the ten men, four were reverends including M. Morrison Clark. According to the St. Louis city directory, the other men all held jobs including a woodworker, provisions dealer, a laborer, and a barber (Edwards 1865). Otherwise, we have little information about the men, but Clark was a graduate of Oberlin College, and many of the men had families with school age-children. The fact that they had children may have been why they were interested in being involved in the school board to insure that all African American children had the opportunity to obtain an education. In addition to the ten African Americans on the board, the superintendent at the time, George Candee, insisted on the inclusion of four Caucasian men, but allowed the African American men to make the selection. Similar to the African American men, three of the Caucasian men were reverends with the fourth owning a family business with his sons (Edwards 1865).

When some scholars discuss Candee's work in St. Louis, they do so with scorn and skepticism. They say that Candee believed African Americans were not capable of running their own schools because they favored African American teachers over Caucasian teachers and they disliked Caucasians and refused to work with them (Richardson 1975; Williams 2005). This may be a part of the story, but there appears to have been internal issues between Candee and Mr. Richardson, who also worked for the AMA in St. Louis at the time.

Based on the correspondence from Candee to his supervisor in New York, it appears that Mr. Richardson was jealous of Candee's work with the African American community and felt that he (Richardson) was "out of place," especially after the creation of the school board. Clark, the school board president, also wrote to the national office to express his concern over Mr. Richardson's involvement in the schools (Clark 1864b). Candee asked his supervisor to speak to Mr. Richardson about the situation so the matter could be resolved (Candee 1864d).

In one of his first letters to his supervisor after the formation of the board, Candee indicated its first objectives were to "furnish first class schools for the children, that they may have a fair chance to learn, and to furnish colored teachers employment in schools." Candee went on to explain that these objectives were important to the "elevation" of their race (Candee 1864e). This early argument for African American teachers was one that continued to be heard as more African Americans became involved in educational advocacy.

Candee specifically requested that the AMA recruit and send two African American teachers to St. Louis immediately in order to "comply" with the feelings of the people. He also included a "condition" from the Caucasian school board members that a suitable superintendent "either colored or White" be hired as well if they were to give their "name and influence" to the cause. Candee ended his letter by once again speaking of his ill health and saying that he was



not capable of doing the work required of the superintendent (Candee to S.S. Jocelyn May 13, 1864).

Even though Candee asked the AMA to hire African American teachers, he expressed regret a couple months later when the school board continued to insist on African American teachers. Candee thought the African American board members could be “induced” to accept “first class teachers without reference to race.” He went on to say that they were willing to accept poorly qualified African American teachers over highly qualified Caucasian teachers and this created a “great obstacle.” He provided the example of the president of a Colored Freeman’s Society in New York talking to the community about getting placements for African American teachers. Candee was appalled with this emphasis and thought the lecture should have been about “educating those who are neglected” or creating “quality schools” (Candee 1864f).

Candee’s passionate rants against the use of African American teachers called into question why he was willing to request them in the first place. In the final pages of his letter he accused the AMA of essentially running a jobs program for unqualified African American teachers in order for them to provide for their families. Candee said the AMA was doing a disservice to the African American community by putting these teachers in classrooms. Candee concluded his letter by resigning his position and requesting his next paycheck of \$25 (Candee 1864f).

Though he resigned his post in June, Candee still communicated with the AMA national office on behalf of the school board in August. In his correspondence he asked for three teachers at the request of “Bro. Clark.” In almost a defeatist tone, he continued by specifying “colored teachers” and asked if their names and addresses could be sent directly to M. Clark so he could follow up with them (Candee 1864h).

Clark followed up Candee's letter with one of his own on August 10th. In this letter, he let the AMA know that the board would meet in a few days to discuss the teacher candidates they recommended. In the last line of the letter, he closed by requesting the hiring of an African American superintendent to replace Candee (Clark 1864c). Just a few days later, Clark sent a second letter saying they still had not selected the teachers, but wanted to know if the AMA would pay the salary and board for the new teachers (Clark 1864e).

Almost a month later, Clark sent another letter letting the AMA know that the school board had put together a committee to research the parents' ability to pay for the teachers' room and board (Clark to 1864f). This double taxation was exactly what Clark and the other board members had not wanted to happen when they constituted the board. By collecting money from parents to pay for teachers, the AMA was acting no better than the state, which taxed poor African Americans to pay for services they did not receive. On September 28th Clark sent a Western Union Telegram indicating they had the money to board the teachers and the teachers should "come at once" (Clark to G. Whipple September 28, 1864).

In one of his letters to the AMA, Clark indicated the hiring of a second African American teacher, Green Wilkerson. Mr. Wilkerson was to be hired under the same contract as the first African American teacher, George Booth. Contrary to Candee's claim of the board hiring inferior African American teachers, Wilkerson (as well as future teachers) was a graduate of Oberlin College. Before being placed in schools, the teachers were tested in English grammar, geography, and mathematics. This selection process shows that the board was looking not only for African American teachers, but for competent African American teachers (Clark 1864g).

In one of his final letters to the board, Clark expressed dissatisfaction with Green Wilkerson because he would not teach where he was placed (Clark 1865). Almost at the same

time, Wilkerson wrote his own letter complaining about the conditions in St. Louis. He said it was not a “suitable place for children nor a teacher (Wilkerson 1865b). He continued his complaints by mentioning the overcrowding at the 2nd Baptist Church School and the lack of supplies.

While inadequate facilities were of some concern, the school board had bigger issues in the form of the legislature, which was arguing a bill to absorb the AMA schools under the St. Louis Public Schools. If this happened, then the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools would be dissolved and the schools would be overseen by an all-White board (Clark 1865). Wilkerson echoed these sentiments in a letter a few days later, saying that the White Board of Education would “furnish comfortable schools” and the services of AMA teachers would no longer be needed in the city (Wilkerson 1865c).

M. Clark’s prediction became reality when at the close of the Civil War the state legislature required separate schools to be established for African American children at the state’s expense (Leidecker 1941; Primm 1998; Savage 1931). Established as part of the new Missouri State Constitution, Article IX, this new law required that “separate schools be established for children of African descent. All funds provided for the support of the Public Schools shall be appropriated in proportion to the number of children, without regard to color” (St. Louis Public Schools 1866). This law, along with other changes designed to bring democracy and unity back to the states, was part of the Reconstruction period that occurred after the Civil War. Though it did not secede from the Union, Missouri experienced a change in leadership and the creation of a new state constitution.

### **Reconstruction in Missouri**

In January 1865, White men from across the state descended upon Jefferson City to start the difficult work of constructing a new constitution. With the War Between the States behind them, the men looked forward to creating a system of governance that recognized the rights of all men to enjoy the benefits of citizenship. The first act at the convention was to outlaw slavery. When the law was passed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January, Missouri became the first state to pass such an ordinance, even predating Congress and the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (DeArmond 1967; Primm 1998). The state's original constitution, created in 1820 with Missouri's entry into the Union, reflected its slaveholding policies as created by the Missouri Compromise.

Taking the lead in helping to craft the new state constitution was Charles Drake, a politician who had served in the state legislature during the Civil War. Considered the state's Thaddeus Stevens because of his unbreakable persistence, Drake pushed the members of the convention to create a document that insisted upon allegiance to the newly reunited Union and punished those who still expressed Confederate loyalties. Referred to as the "Drake Constitution" the document included a mandatory oath of all voters stating that they did not participate in "armed hostility" against the United States (DeArmond 1967, 369). Because of Missouri's location as a boarder state, it was known to have had divided loyalties during the war with members of the same family meeting on opposite sides of the battlefield (Primm 1998). This oath was designed to ensure that Confederate loyalties did not influence the new government and impede Reconstruction efforts.

As the convention delegates continued to craft a new state constitution, they took the dramatic step of calling for all judges, circuit attorneys, sheriffs, and county recorders to be removed from their offices. This preventative measure was done to deny opportunities for legal

maneuvering by those who still favored and sympathized with the South. Once the courts and chambers were free of Southern allies, the delegates turned their attention to guaranteeing the passage of the constitution by establishing statewide voting registration policies. These policies made sure those who did not sign the oath did not vote, while requiring the governor to set up voting stations throughout the state for enlisted men who had not yet made it home (DeArmond 1967). The inclusion of enlisted men in the vote was the push needed for the new constitution to pass and for the Radical Republicans to take control of the former slave state for the next decade. With a progressive agenda, the Radical Republicans worked towards African American suffrage by creating opportunities for basic human rights such as free public education.

### **African American Education After 1865**

After declaring slavery illegal, the new Missouri State Constitution legally provided for the education of former slaves and Free African Americans by codifying this requirement in the state legal system. Overturning the previous law in 1847 that once made it illegal for African Americans to seek an education, this new law made free public education a right protected by the state. To make sure this right was enjoyed throughout the state, the state superintendent of education hired James Milton Turner, native Missourian and former slave, to travel the state and enforce the new law (Kremer 1991; Moore 1971).

### **James Milton Turner**

James Milton Turner was born in St. Louis County in 1839. His father purchased his freedom when Turner was four years old. Because of the law against educating African Americans, Turner attended secret schools including that of John Berry Meacham that catered to both the enslaved and free populations. At the young age of fourteen, he left Missouri to travel to Ohio to continue his education at Oberlin College, the college that educated many African

Americans who later taught in Missouri schools. Instead of returning to Missouri to teach, Turner returned to work as a servant to a Union military leader stationed at Camp Jackson. Staying close to St. Louis for most the war, Turner sustained a hip injury at the Battle of Shiloh that caused a limp that remained with him throughout his life (Dillard 1934; Kremer 1991; Moore 1971).

After helping the Union army secure victory over the Confederacy, Turner became an advocate for African American education by working for the state superintendent of education. When the 1865 State Constitution was passed, the state was required to ensure that all African Americans received free public education. Turner was hired as assistant state superintendent to travel throughout the state and make sure districts complied with the new law. As mentioned earlier, many districts did not want to provide an education for African Americans and went to great lengths to circumvent the law. At each attempt at injustice, Turner was there to advocate for the students and help ensure their newly acquired rights (Dillard 1934; Kremer 1991; Moore 1971).

For seven months starting in 1869, Turner traveled the state encouraging districts to comply with the state law and sanctioning those who refused. Turner's role as assistant state superintendent granted him access that was unheard of for African Americans at that time. Though the time period was after the war and during Reconstruction, Turner's advocacy for African American education still caused resentment in the White community and made him a target in some rural areas that were more likely to lynch a Negro than to educate him. The dangers Turner faced in his travels were reflected in the letters he wrote back to his supervisor, for example saying of one experience, "I shall know all of its dangers in about 2 hours" when he

was warned about traveling to the heart of Missouri's "Little Dixie," a hotbed of Confederate sympathizers (Kremer 1991).

Unfazed by the danger, Turner continued to spend his time traveling the state advocating for compliance with the state law and even advising the African American community on how to advocate on their own behalf. In Arrow Rock, Missouri, Turner was called to investigate the disappearance of funds designated to build an African American school. Claiming they did not receive the money, the school board said they were not in the financial position to provide a school. Threatening to use money designated for White children, Turner proposed opening an African American school in a local church until a new school could be secured. Certain that the school board would ignore both his suggestion and the law, Turner met with the African American community and "told the colored people to tease Wilhelm (board representative) until he gives them a school that he may be rid of them" (Kremer 1991, 6).

While racism was a big hurdle to the creation and running of schools, the bigger obstacle that Turner discovered was the lack of qualified African American teachers. At the start of his travels, he wrote to his supervisor, "In traveling I find many localities in which schools would be opened but for want of teachers" (Kremer 1991, 4). Turning to his alma mater, Oberlin College, Turner requested teachers, and in addition he turned to the American Missionary Association, who because of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was accustomed to such requests. The need for teachers pushed Turner to transition his efforts from the creation of African American schools to the creation of a school that would prepare African American teachers to enter the classroom.

### **Lincoln Institute Normal School**

Founded in 1866 by the 62<sup>nd</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Colored Infantry of Missouri, Lincoln Institute was established as part of the state's new responsibility to educate African Americans. Headed by President Richard B. Foster, Lincoln Institute was set up in the state capital, Jefferson City, after unsuccessful attempts to secure space in St. Louis. The first president of Lincoln Institute was a White abolitionist who hailed from New Hampshire, graduated from Dartmouth, and participated in John Brown's raid in Kansas. Three years after Lincoln's founding, President Foster spoke to the State Teacher's Association about the problems facing African American Education in Missouri. Foster took the State Board of Education to task over many of the conditions that would continue to be a source of contention for the African American community. Starting off by questioning the accuracy of the state's data on African American school enrollment, Foster continued with criticisms about teacher quality and the poor conditions of the schoolhouses (Kremer 1991). These same issues were still a concern more than forty years later for the Colored Citizens Council of 1907.

The second half of Foster's speech expressed the dire need for African American teachers. Referring to the practice of looking outside of the state to the North and East for teachers, Foster made a plea for teachers educated in Missouri. Because of better pay and prestige, many Whites preferred to teach in White schools rather than to accept teaching positions in African American schools. Foster claimed that more than one thousand African American teachers were needed for the schools and the state had barely one hundred that were qualified. Getting to the final crux of his speech, Foster insisted that Missouri must have a Normal School for African American teachers if they were to comply with the state mandate to educate African American children (Kremer 1998; Webster 1971).



The last half of Foster's speech along with Turner's own experience as assistant state superintendent drove James Milton Turner to seek state funding for Lincoln Institute to open a Normal School for African American teachers. Because of his efforts as an educational advocate throughout the state, Turner had gained both African American and White allies who were willing to support his desire for a Normal School. He convened a group of African Americans in Jefferson City in 1870 to support the state superintendent's request as well as Foster's speech advocating for Lincoln Institute to create a Normal School. Using his political prowess, Turner reminded the Radical Republicans that they needed to show that they were serious about meeting the needs of African Americans if they wanted their support in the next election (Kremer 1991; Jack 2007). This strategy was one that was used by future African American citizens' councils who understood the political landscape and the powerful role that interest convergence played in White decision making.

Less than a month later the Missouri General Assembly provided a yearly grant of five thousand dollars to Lincoln Institute on the condition that it become a Normal School for African American public teachers. In addition to the five thousand received from the legislature, the Institute's trustees had to raise almost fifteen thousand to secure the facilities and resources to operate the school. Because of his advocacy on behalf of African American education and specifically the Normal School at Lincoln Institute, Turner was recognized as playing a vital role in Missouri education during the Reconstruction period. Though he moved on from education to the world of national and international politics, Turner remained a state hero as exhibited by the honors bestowed upon him at his funeral. From politicians to pastors, all members of the community came out to show their respect ("J. Milton Turner Buried" 1915). The response was

so great that in addition to the funeral there was a community memorial described in size as “monster” by the *St. Louis Argus* (“Memorial to J. Milton Turner” 1915, 1).

### **St. Louis Public Schools**

While Turner was traveling the state enforcing the new state law, the St. Louis Public Schools were busy determining how they would address the new directive to provide education for African American students. Immediately following the end of the Civil War and the adoption of the new state constitution, the St. Louis Public Schools’ annual report issued an impassioned plea from the board president, Felix Coste, to support the new law with a sense of urgency. Reminding the community that African Americans paid taxes and were entitled to an education paid for by those taxes, Coste stated that St. Louis could not afford to allow an entire race of children to go without an education. Calling on the often-used idea of St. Louis as a great city, Coste asked, “Shall we have an adequate and efficient system of public schools, worthy of the present and prospective greatness of St. Louis” (St. Louis Public Schools 1865).

During the first year of the new law, the St. Louis Public Schools did not establish any African American schools, but instead absorbed the schools already run by the American Missionary Association. As described in letters between the president of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, M. M. Clark, and the national AMA offices, the district absorbed the schools as part of their new responsibility to provide free education. The schools remained under the control of the AMA and the board for the first year while the school district shared administrative costs with the Western Sanitary Commission and individual donors (St. Louis Public Schools 1865).

During the following year the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis established African American schools identified by numbers instead of names (using names was the custom

of the White schools). The three schools had an enrollment of 437 students during the year. School Number 1 was located on Fifth Avenue near Gratiot Street in a building owned by the board, and it employed three teachers. School Number 2 was located on the corner of Tenth Street and Chambers Street in a rental building and employed two teachers. School Number 3 was on the corner of Twenty-Fourth and Morgan, also in a rented building, and it employed two teachers. The cost for the administration of the three schools including rent, teachers' salaries, lease improvements, and incidentals was \$6213.00 for the year (St. Louis Public Schools 1866).

The St. Louis Public Schools continued to improve and to increase the number of African American schools. In 1871 there were six schools, and three of them were moved to better facilities. School Number 3, the school formerly located in Carondelet, was moved to a building on the south side of town that had once been used by White students. School Number 2, originally located in a church basement, was moved to a house on Twelfth Street and Webster that was purchased and renovated by the board. Similar to the school located in Carondelet, School Number 1 was also moved to a school formerly occupied by White students. The costs associated with the moves and renovations were \$73,063, which was an increase of more than \$18,000 over the previous year. With this increase in spending and the changes in school locations, the district declared the African American schools to be equal to the White schools in the district (St. Louis Public Schools 1872).

Over the next few years the St. Louis Public Schools continued to sporadically report on the progress of the African American schools. In the annual report of the 1872 school year, the board reiterated the improvements it had made the previous year and stated that the enrollment remained steady at about 1560 students. The operating costs for the year also remained at the same level as the previous year at \$18,384 (St. Louis Public Schools Education 1873). The lack

of updates on the African American schools other than traditional statistical data for the next few years indicated that the board thought it had satisfied the state requirement established by the 1865 Missouri State Constitution to provide an education for African American students. The next mention of African American education would be the establishment of Sumner High School in 1875.

### **History of Sumner High School**

Because of the legislation requiring the state to provide education for all students and the growing African American population, the Board of Education for the City of St. Louis decided to establish an African American high school. Using the former Washington School, the board planned to move its three African American elementary schools into this building along with the new high school. This plan was met with resistance by the African American community, led by Charlton H. Tandy, a civil rights leader with a paying job as a United States customs messenger (Gersman 1972; Jack 2007; Leidecker 1941).

Using his home church of Central Baptist, Tandy called together the African American community to protest not only the location of the new African American high school, but other educational issues. With two White school board members and Superintendent William Torrey Harris in attendance, Tandy began listing the community concerns. First among them was that African American students deserved a clean school in a quiet neighborhood as much as the White students did. He then made reference to the fact that many other parts of the state had African American teachers and St. Louis should have them as well. Finally, he got to the location of the proposed combined elementary school and high school. This proposal was unacceptable because not only was the school near a jail, but it resulted in long walks for the students since it was not near their neighborhoods (Gersman 1972; Leidecker 1941). These

complaints as well as others continued to be voiced about the location of the high school, resulting in a formal proposal presented to the board in 1907.

Responding to the community complaints about the proposed combination elementary and high school, Superintendent Harris said that he thought the school would serve the best interest of the students. The Washington School would allow them to have a high school. The consolidation of the elementary schools would provide better delivery of educational services and ultimately better teaching. In response to the location of the school, he did not address the fact that it was near a jail, but did say that students wouldn't have to walk more than a half mile to school (Gersman 1972).

While Superintendent Harris's comments appeared to have the best interests of the African American community in mind, there were other issues at play behind the scene. The *Globe Democrat* reported that the school district was deeply in debt and had failed to balance its budget for years. Faced with having to provide an African American high school, the school board chose to utilize an old school formerly reserved for Whites, which they had been unable to sell. This decision reflected the board's attitude of providing for Caucasians first and then giving African Americans whatever remained (Gersman 1972).

The teacher's committee of the school board continued to meet with the delegation from the African American community and was able to convince them to accept the Washington School proposal. While this acceptance may have appeared to be a victory for the board, it foreshadowed future conflicts with the African American community and educational issues in the city. African Americans were not willing to stand aside and accept what they were reluctantly given. When the school board established African American schools, they brought not only African American students into the public education system, but African American

educational activists as well. These African Americans would continue to fight for proper facilities, competent African American teachers, and educational opportunities for their children.

Established in 1875 by the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis in their October 12 proceedings, the former Washington Elementary School for Caucasian students became the Charles Sumner High School, a combined elementary and high school for African American students. The school was named after Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, who called for full emancipation of enslaved people in 1861, almost four years before the Civil War ended the institution. In addition to the name change, the school was also to have the same rank as a first class school. This change in rank was important because it put the high school in the same category as similar White high schools of the time period (St. Louis Public Schools 1875).

The first principal of Sumner High School was A. C. Clayton, a White administrator who had served in a similar role in the district's Colored School Number 3 (Brantley 1965). Though the creation of the high school was a victory for African Americans, the community continued to advocate for further advancement of educational opportunities for African American students. While there was a high school for African American students, it was being staffed by White teachers. Similar to the work done by their predecessors, the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools and James Milton Turner, the Colored Education Council advocated for the hiring of African American teachers in the St. Louis Public Schools. Through their advocacy efforts, this group not only provided role models in the classroom but also helped establish a solid African American middle class through employment with the school district.

### **Colored Education Council**

While the school district thought they had fulfilled their responsibility to educate African American students, the African American community wanted them to do more. Instead of

relying on White teachers, members of the community believed that they should have African American teachers for their schools. The insistence on African American teachers was not new as shown almost a decade earlier by the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools. Instead of a school board making the request, the request came from the Colored Education Council.

The Colored Education Council was composed of prominent African American men in the community who worked not only on issues of education, but on various issues of racial uplift. Led by president J.H. Rector of the 8<sup>th</sup> Street Church, the council included Rev. S. P. Anderson of Central Baptist Church, A. T. Berthe, C. E. Parker, J. W. Grant, Alfred White, Richard Smith, Jas Thomas, J. Milton Turner, and Francis Dorsey. Organized in 1877, the group focused on improved school facilities and African American teachers. At its first meeting at 8<sup>th</sup> Street Church, the group made a direct appeal to the school board members present at the meeting to provide them with the Dumas School building (Stevens 1927). The Board of Education of the City of St. Louis Annual Report from 1877 does not include a section on Colored schools, but did indicate an increase in the number of schools from six to nine due to the extension of the city limits under its new charter (St. Louis Public Schools 1878).

The second issued addressed by the group was the hiring of African American teachers. In March of 1877 the group sent a letter to the Board of Education outlining their requests. The letter began by referencing their authority to petition the board because of an earlier convention of Colored citizens held in Jefferson City the previous year. This convention was composed of African American teachers who met to develop a strategy to gain access to more classrooms (Gersman 1972). The letter plainly stated that St. Louis had one public school system, but the schools were not equal, and those of “African blood” did not benefit from the same “first class”

amenities that their White peers had. Moving directly to the question of teachers, the council argued that since White schools had White teachers, African American schools should have teachers of the same racial background. They went even further by saying that White teachers were not the best teachers for colored schools. This statement went beyond the line that other citizens' councils were reluctant to cross when advocating for African American teachers. The group concluded their request by emphasizing the need for qualified teachers who were able to pass the teacher's exam and understand the needs and wants of African American students ("Amendment Wanted" 1877).

The advocacy for African American teachers did not end with the letter to the board. Once the school board was pressured to begin hiring African American teachers as part of an experiment (St. Louis Public Schools 1879), the education council worked hard to help recruit qualified teachers from around the country (Stevens 1927). The African American candidates underwent the same rigorous testing as the White candidates with similar results. Sample questions in mathematics consisted of word problems asking respondents to make conversions and reductions. The grammar section focused on parts of speech, use of mute vowels in words, and verb tense. In the first year of recruiting, African American teachers had a pass rate of 66 percent compared with 69 percent for their White counterparts (The School Teachers 1879).

Once the district began hiring African American teachers eight years after the Normal School was established at Lincoln Institute and James Milton Turner was on the council, it was strange that there was no mention of recruiting teachers from within the state. Similar to the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, the Colored Education Council was successful in securing African American teachers, mostly from out of state, to educate the next generation. The information concerning the Colored Education Council stopped after the



acquisition of the Dumas School building and the hiring of African American teachers. As stated in their letter to the board, these were their main objectives in regards to improving African American education for students. Because there was no other information, we do not know whether the group disbanded after their success, or whether they may have moved on to other issues affecting the African American community.

### **African American Educational Advocacy**

The African American updates may have disappeared from the annual reports of the St. Louis Public Schools between 1878 and 1887, but that does not mean African Americans were not continuing their fight for educational equality. In 1887 the annual report made mention of the difficulty in securing qualified African American teachers for the thirteen Colored schools. The district even went so far as to retain quality female teachers who chose to get married and thus took the risk of losing their jobs. The report also stated that many of the schools were small and were most likely to stay that way so that there was little need for additional teachers beyond the seventy-eight currently employed. This statement of slow growth was in direct contrast to the community's call for additional schools to help relieve the overcrowded classrooms of the African American schools (St. Louis Public Schools 1888).

The board made reference to this request for additional facilities in the 1889 board report when it stated that it had heard the claims of the people but could not find proper facilities. Instead of providing new buildings, the board chose to add on classrooms in a piecemeal fashion to the current inadequate schools. Since they were not able to accommodate all of the requests of the community, the board stated that the claims would receive "early attention" when possible. Finally, one of the first mentions of a complaint against the location of Sumner High School was put before the board along with whether or not it was discriminatory to number instead of name

the Colored schools (St. Louis Public Schools 1889). The request to name the schools after prominent African Americans was granted by the board the following year, while the request for a new Sumner High School remained under consideration (Gersman 1972).

The next mention of African American education by the board was an 1894 update on Sumner High School. The update provided a brief history of the school followed by information about the addition of a Normal course in 1890. This new one-year course was added on to the end of four years of high school for a total of five years of preparative study to become a teacher in a Colored school in the district. In its first four years, the Normal course graduated 33 students while the regular high school graduated 130 students. Several of the 130 graduates continued on to the two-year Normal course to gain access to positions as directors and paid assistants in the Colored kindergarten program (St. Louis Public Schools 1894).

Sumner High School was once again featured in the 1895 annual board report with glowing praise for providing a liberal education that allowed its graduates entry into the “best colleges open to colored students” (St. Louis Public Schools 1895, 132). The school was also recognized for providing all of the primary grade teachers through its Normal course. The year 1895 showed a steady increase in the student enrollment, attendance, and graduation of African American students at the high school level. Principal Warring commented on the quality of the school and its students:

The discipline of the school is easy and smooth, and the almost uniform habit of the studious application and compliance with rule, which at all times characterize our pupils, have evoked the most favorable comments from citizens who are able to place a just estimate upon the value of order and system in educational methods. (St. Louis Public Schools 1895, 137)

Ten years after the initial complaint, the board finally found new accommodations for Sumner High School in 1898 when it moved from its original location at Eleventh and Spruce to its new location at Fifteenth and Walnut Streets. The new location, the former Eliot School for Whites, was renovated and included a well-equipped chemistry lab. The White students were moved to nearby schools Lincoln and Franklin (“For the Children” 1897). The annual report from that year credited the “kindness and liberality” of the members of the Board of Education for the new location with no reference to the community advocacy that was mentioned in the 1889 board report (St. Louis Public Schools 1898, 113). The annual report also failed to mention a letter they received in 1896 that included the signatures of over three hundred African American community members requesting a new location for Sumner High School (Gersman 1972). This omission reiterated the paternalistic belief that Whites gave African Americans access to educational opportunities with little effort made by African Americans. As the counter-stories used in this study show, the myth of White generosity is not only overrated, but a complete whitewash of history designed to preserve racial inequality.

## **Conclusion**

The praise by the district of the Colored schools continued the following year with statements of solid progress that is not evident in other district departments. The district made claims that new buildings, with a few exceptions, were taking the place of older, outdated facilities. A quality teacher’s course was firmly established and producing quality teachers for the colored classrooms. A great partnership existed between the teachers and parents as they worked together to increase attendance and decrease tardiness. In the eyes of the district, after only thirty years, they had created a segregated system that provided equally for students on both

sides of the color line. Not everyone viewed the progress of the district with the same rosy glasses, including members of the African American community who remained diligent in advocating for educational equality. These community members joined together to form citizens' councils that continued the work of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools and the Colored Education Council for the next generation of St. Louis City students.

### **Chapter 3: African American Education in St. Louis After 1900**

At the turn of the century, the St. Louis Board of Education had fulfilled the education requirements for African American students established by the 1865 State Constitution. The district provided free tax supported schools for all children regardless of race. In the view of the board, they had gone beyond this edict by establishing a Normal School and hiring African American teachers, providing well-equipped facilities in proper neighborhoods, and creating the first high school west of the Mississippi. The board boasted about the accomplishments of Sumner High School in the first report of the new century, saying it “has made much progress in the last decade” (St. Louis Public Schools 1901, 82).

The following years emphasized the success of Sumner High School and the effect of that success on the school’s growth. Since 1885, Sumner High School had grown from 20 students to an enrollment of 378 students in 1907. This growth was accompanied by a move to a different facility and the building of more classrooms to include a total of 19, but the school still could not keep up with the steady growth in numbers of students (St. Louis Public Schools 1908). The time had come for Sumner High School to have a new building, not a school no longer fit for White students, or a haphazard mix of classroom additions. Once again the African American community came together to meet the challenge and advocate for continued educational advancement against a board that thought it had already done its fair share. Leading the charge for a new Sumner High School was Central Baptist Church pastor George Stevens and the Colored Citizens’ Council of 1907.

#### **Colored Citizens’ Council and George Stevens**

Born in Philadelphia months before the start of the Civil War, George Stevens was the son of literate free African Americans. Educated at the Institute for Colored Youth, a well-

known Quaker school, his father was a cabinetmaker before joining the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts to fight for the Union. Becoming an officer by the end of the war, the senior Stevens moved his family to Virginia where he became the postmaster and finally the sheriff of Essex County (Stevens 1927).

Stevens attended public schools in Philadelphia and Donaldson, Connecticut, living briefly with an uncle before heading to college at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Upon graduation and marriage, Stevens moved to Albany, New York, where he served as pastor of the Bethany Baptist Church and built a thriving ministry. Because of his success in Albany, Stevens was called to work in Boston at the Calvary Baptist Church. After five years in Boston, Stevens accepted the position of Senior Minister at Central Baptist Church in St. Louis in 1903 (Stevens 1927). Arriving at a time of conflict and division in the church, Stevens decided to focus on unification and reorganization. Through this process he instilled a sense of personal responsibility in the church membership, which grew to nearly three thousand members during his tenure. Stevens used his role in the church to speak out on behalf of children's issues, specifically education.

Only a couple of years after his arrival, Stevens encouraged African Americans to "demand equality" through integrated schools. At a church program celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Lloyd Garrison, Stevens made a passionate claim for equality saying, "The time for black men to claim and expect every right and consideration which every other man claims and should expect, is now" ("Urges Negroes to Demand Equality" 1905). Stevens proclaimed that segregated schools caused misunderstanding and estrangement between the races. If the country was to have a future, all students needed to meet and know each other while they were young and still in school ("Urges Negroes to Demand Equality" 1905). Stevens used

an example of a recent incident between two churches to support his call for racial unity. Union Memorial Church, an African American church, had attempted to buy Central Presbyterian's church building. The White church across the street from Central Presbyterian objected to the purchase even though they claimed to "profess to be purchased in the same blood and serving the same Christ and going to the same heaven" ("Urges Negroes to Demand Equality" 1905).

In his role at Central Baptist Church, Stevens continued the tradition both in St. Louis and across the country of African American churches not only providing educational opportunities, but advocating for them as well. A visit from Charles Dodge in 1907 led George Stevens to revive the fight for a proper location for Sumner High School and the creation of the Colored Citizens' Council, a group that would present a formal proposal to the St. Louis Board of Education (Stevens 1927).

### ***A Complaint with Illustrations to The Board of Education of St. Louis***

Upon discussions with Charles Dodge about the school district's plan to make repairs on the current Sumner High School to allow for more students, Stevens along with Dodge made a visit to Professor Caspar Woodward, a school board member and faculty member at Washington University. After listening to their argument, Woodward said it would be a "waste of energy and money" to move Sumner. Dodge and Stevens argued that the shift in the African American population due to residential segregation had pushed students farther and farther from the high school location. Woodward asked them to prove their statements about population shifts and the board would consider their request (Stevens 1927). From this challenge, *A Complaint with Illustrations to The Board of Education of St. Louis* was born.

The *Complaint* was the result of a partnership between members of the Central Baptist Church and the community with both members and non-members working together. The maps

were drawn by J. E. McWorter, who sectioned out portions of the city to more easily show African American population trends. Miss Julia Childs, a teacher at Sumner, was responsible for mapping all of the current Sumer students' residencies on the map to show how far they traveled to school each day. Once the population shift was documented, Harry Hopson, an amateur photographer, took photos of the current Sumer High School to highlight the undesirable traits of its location (Stevens 1927).

Once the twelve-page pamphlet was complete, it was unfortunately leaked to Superintendent Soldan by a White administrator who exclaimed, "Mr. Cole [the principal of Simmons School] has a pamphlet attacking the schools." Soldan immediately called together the African American principals and learned the pamphlets had come from George Stevens. Upon getting copies of the pamphlet Soldan exclaimed, "Complaint, always complaining." The school board was not as quick to dismiss the pamphlet as one more complaint, and the plan to renovate Sumner High School was halted (Stevens 1927).

### **The New Sumner High School**

*This statement is sent partly in compliance with [your] request and partly because we wish to show your Board why we are persistent in this complaint, which it is from no love of agitation, but from serious solicitude for our children and the highest interest of our community educationally. ---Colored Citizens 1907.*

In 1907, the Colored Citizens' Council of St. Louis presented a formal written report to the St. Louis Board of Education concerning the conditions and location of Sumner High School. This report reflected the importance African Americans placed on education as well as the importance of building community in a segregated society. Because of the early date of the report, there were few available newspaper accounts to round out the story, but the report provided enough details to show not only the need but the support of the new high school by the



African American community. The report also included many illustrations that told the story of despair and decay that greeted students and teachers each day.

The first argument made in the *Complaint* dealt with the location of the new building. Like all real estate, location is everything. In this case, the *Complaint* used the population growth and “drift” to determine that in five years the African American population would be mostly west of Grand Avenue in Ellardsville (“the Ville”). This forecast was justified by the Simmons School, already in the neighborhood, and its rapid growth (St. Louis Public Schools 1908). This forecast was also supported by the many residential restrictions in the city that prevented African Americans from freely moving into certain neighborhoods (Gordon 2008). These racial restrictions created pockets of African American communities or as Heathcott (2005) called them, “archipelagos,” African American islands surrounded by Whiteness.

The Ville neighborhood was slowly becoming a thriving African American community that would see the addition of not only Sumner High School but many other African American institutions such as Poro College in 1918 and Homer G. Phillips Hospital in 1937. Because of these institutions and the residential housing restrictions based on race, the Ville became home to St. Louis’s African American middle class professionals. Doctors, nurses, and teachers lived in the neighborhood to be close to their places of employment, which helped to stabilize the community and allow it to grow (Dowden-White 2011).

The second argument concerned the environment around the current location of Sumner High School, at 11th and Spruce Streets. The framers of the *Complaint* believed that the environment surrounding the school was just as important as the school building and its location. In this case, the environment around Sumner did little to “refine manners, exalt the imagination, and to fill the youthful mind with the true, the beautiful and the good” (3). Instead of seeing

beauty and possibility, the students saw gated prison cells, lumberyards, execution set ups, and sometimes even dead bodies awaiting identification. Regardless of the good work being done inside the school building, the surroundings helped to remind the students of their place in society's racial hierarchy (Colored Citizens 1907).

The complaint concerning the neighborhood surrounding the current location of Sumner High School was supported by the St. Louis Board of Education's decision not to build an addition to the school, but instead utilize portable classrooms. The use of portable classrooms for African American students was quite common as a way of dealing with school enrollment increases without building permanent structures. In the case of Sumner High School, the board decided not to build permanent structures because of the condition of the neighborhood (Colored Citizens 1907). But if the neighborhood did not warrant a school addition, why would it even warrant a school?

In addition to the arguments around physical structure and neighborhood quality, the complaint challenged the Board of Education on issues of equality based on race. Similar to the arguments made today concerning inner-city schools compared to suburban schools, the African American citizens wanted an explanation as to why McKinley High School, which served White students, was "spacious, well-kept, and modern," all the things Sumner High School was not. While African Americans continued to argue for a new high school, the school board approved a new White high school at a cost of \$650,000. To add insult to injury, a board member responded to the request for a new Sumner High School by saying, "To change the site of Sumner now would be a waste of energy" (Colored Citizens 1907, 7). This comment by an elected official showed a lack of interest and respect for African American children and the community as a whole.

## **White Opposition to New Sumner High School Location**

While the Colored Citizens' Council lobbied for a new Sumner High School, White organizations worked to prevent it. Leading the charge, the Northwestern Protective Association did not object to the new high school, but to its location on Cottage Avenue. According to the neighborhood association, an African American high school would cause their property to decrease in value. In addition to loss of value, they also predicted a mass exodus of White residents should African Americans move in to be closer to the new school. This loss in White residents would "render the schools now used by White children useless" due to low enrollment ("Red Ink Dodgers Protest Against Negro School" 1908).

Even when Whites seemed to support African American education, they still objected to locating the school in the Northwest part of the city. In a 1908 letter to the editor, the author "Sympathizer" wrote:

Why not locate it [Sumner High School] in the district between Garrison and Jefferson, Washington and Olive. This central district is already populated with the colored people, their most influential churches are there, with possibility of more to come, and the streets to a large extent are occupied by them for business purpose. Market, Laclede, Lawton, Pine, Morgan, Franklin, Washington are almost given over to them as residence districts.

("Afro-American 1908)

Written by a White person, this letter went on to praise "what these people have done for themselves," having "started with empty pockets, helpless as children." This writer supported the idea of a new African American high school as long as it stayed within the prescribed boundaries of segregated St. Louis.

A few weeks before, an African American had written a letter to the editor that contradicted the above statements about the race of the residents around the proposed Cottage Avenue site as well as the neighborhood association's fear of African Americans moving to the neighborhood. Echoing the sentiments of the original proposal, the writer condemned the current location and believed the new location would "go a great way toward improving the status of the Negro graduate." Having done his research, the writer stated that a Colored school, Simmons, was located on St. Louis Avenue. While a White school was located on Cottage Avenue at 4000, the proposed Sumner site was blocks away at 4200 Cottage Avenue. In terms of the population in the area, African Americans owned houses on numerous blocks that surrounded the proposed site including St. Louis Avenue, Kennerly, North Market, Garfield, and Whittier to name just a few (Afro-American 1908). African Americans did not have to move into the neighborhood. They were already there.

This was not the first time the Northwestern Protective Association had tried to maintain the racial boundaries of the city's neighborhoods. Just a year before the proposed Sumner High School location, the association had been fighting to keep a new Negro garden out of their community. Measuring only 400 x 600 feet, the garden was to be a social venue for African Americans that provided evening and weekend entertainment. Playing on Whites fears of African Americans, the article quoted a Mrs. Grace Scully, who said the streets would be unsafe for White women if such a place were allowed in the neighborhood ("Many Plans Made to Block Negro Garden" 1907). Again, using the argument of loss of property values, the association went a step further by saying the Whites had worked hard for their money to pay for their homes and could not afford to lose them. Even financially strapped, the association raised almost \$500 for legal fees to fight the garden. Not having to fight alone, the association was joined by

adjoining wards and property owners adjacent to the property (“Whites Against Negro Schools to Fight at Polls” 1908).

Committed to keeping African Americans out of their neighborhoods, whether they were playing or going to school, the neighborhood association was not deterred when the St. Louis Board of Education decided to continue the plans for the new Sumner High School. Speaking for the association was its president, Michael Mullen, and a Presbyterian minister, Rev. C. W. Logan. The decision by the board’s Joint Committee on Instruction and Finance led the neighborhood association to talk of legal action to stop the board (“Whites Against Negro School to Fight at Polls” 1908).

Before filing the injunction, the Northwestern Protective Association took a page out of today’s real estate game and tried to get the proposed area condemned or considered “blighted.” This tactic has been used as a way of obtaining desirable land, mostly from African Americans, to be used for the benefit of Whites, whether it was for a highway, a shopping mall, or a new sports stadium (Gordon 2008). Taking the fight to city hall, the association appealed to the House of Delegates to condemn the property and have the city purchase it (“Injunction Possible Barrier to Negro New High School” 1908). The House of Delegates passed a bill that authorized the issuing of bonds to purchase the entire block where the property was located. The bill then went to the mayor’s office for signature and to the voters on November 3, 1908 (“Whites Against Negro School to Fight at Polls” 1908).

Although they were criticized in letters to the editor in the St. Louis Argus such as one entitled, “Do the People Rule?” the St. Louis Board of Education continued their process by opening the bids for the building of the new Sumner High School:

The recent advertising for bids for the new Sumner High School to be located on Cottage Avenue emphasizes the fact [that] they do not. Ninety per cent of people living in the Northwestern part of the city have protested against the location of the Negro High School in their midst, well knowing that property will depreciate in value, ruining hundreds of hard working people who have partly paid for their homes, that it will be the means of bringing hundreds of negroes to that part of the city. (“Do The People Rule?” 1908)

Estimating a cost of \$350,000, the board accepted a bid by the Nicholas Pelligreen Construction and Investment Company for \$297,827, or \$50,000 less than their estimate. This cost was \$350,000 less than the cost for the high school for Whites approved by the board at a meeting in 1907. The new Sumner High School was to include 57 rooms to house 590 students who would enjoy the use of an auditorium, gymnasium, library, conservatory, machine shop, wood-working shop, and a laundry and housekeeping suite (“Lowest Bid on High School for Negroes is \$297, 827” 1908).

In the end, the voters did not pass the bond issues that would have prevented the building of the new Sumner High School on Cottage Avenue. The Northwest Protective Association, along with many other White neighborhood associations, worked diligently to prevent African Americans from moving outside of the approved racial boundaries. These organizations preyed on the fear of Whites by predicting “negro invasions,” loss of housing values, and even interracial marriages. In calling for support for the failed bond issue, the Northwest Protective Association president said, “If we are beaten, the people of other parts of the city may be brought face to face with the same problem” (“Negro School Site Depends On Park Vote” 1908).

A letter to the editor in March of 1909 summed up the African American community's feelings of pride for the new high school and forgiveness of the Whites who had fought against it:

As I passed up Cottage aveue (sic) last Sunday my heart swelled with pride at the sight of the noble proportions of the new Sumner (negro) High School. For this splendid recognition for the rights of the colored people. We are indebted largely to those brave Democrats, Messrs. Schroers, Lockwood, Colnon and Johnson and Attorney Grossman. We intend to have the greatest celebration that the colored people ever had in this town when this building is dedicated, and will have a grand ball and festival in the main hall, to which we will invite all our White neighbors (Afro-American 1908).

In the end the Complaint served its purpose and the school board agreed in 1908 to build a new Sumner High School on Cottage Avenue in the Ville neighborhood at a cost of almost \$313,000 (St. Louis Public Schools 1908). This was less than half the cost of the school they had built for Whites just a couple of years earlier, but it was the most modern school in the country for African American students at the time. Opened in 1911, the new high school had a gymnasium, laboratories, a library, drawing rooms, and a lunchroom (Annual Report of the St. Louis St. Louis Public Schools 1911).

The success of the new Sumner High School went beyond the building to the strength of the African American community to advocate for educational resources for their children. Similar to the stories of parental advocacy and even financial advocacy told by Anderson (1988) and Walker (1996), the story of how the St. Louis African American community systematically fought for their rights served as the foundation for the future success of Sumner High School as well as Vashon High School.

### **Central School Patrons Association**

The victory for Sumner High School did not stop with a new location and new facilities. As stated in their *Complaint*, the Colored Citizens Council of St. Louis continued to lobby the board for proper leadership, teachers, and curriculum for the new high school. The board answered their call with the hiring of Frank Williams, the principal of Sumner High School from 1909 to 1917. Under Williams's leadership, the high school earned accreditation by the North Central Association of High Schools and Colleges, which is still recognized to this day (*The Maroon and White* 1928). Not only was Sumner High School documented as the first high school west of the Mississippi for African Americans, but it was now recognized as the best.

George Stevens and many of the men associated with the Colored Citizen's Council recognized the importance of their work and came together to form the Central School Patrons Association in 1922. The new organization was a continuation of their work for Sumner High School as they worked for the "betterment of the schools" (Stevens 1927). George Stevens became its president with attorney Homer G. Phillips serving as chairman of the executive committee, J. E. McWorter as secretary and editor of the *St. Louis Argus*, and J. E. Mitchell as chairman of the publicity committee. Though the documents associated with the Central School Patrons Association were destroyed in a fire at the Central Baptist Church in the late 1970s, some information about their purpose can be found in the church's documented history written by George Stevens (Stevens 1927).

The purpose of the Central School Patrons Association was continual improvement of educational opportunities for African American children in St. Louis. These improvements included a high school east of Grand Avenue, a standardized teacher's college separate from Sumner High School, and proper professional development supported by the district for African



American teachers (Stevens 1927). Though these improvements were important, the most important role of the Central School Patrons Association was to keep the fight for better education on the minds of African Americans. This sentiment was echoed in the purpose of the African American press, who also worked hard to keep the issues of the day in front of the community (Roberts and Klibanoff 2007). One important issue at the turn of the century was the growing number of African Americans leaving the South for a better life.

### **African American Migration**

Between 1910 and 1970, over six million African Americans left the constraints of the South for the promise of freedom in the North. Even though the South was the land of their forefathers and the only home they had known, African Americans could no longer endure the lack of economic opportunities, the constant threat of violence, or the thought of their children growing up without a proper education (Marullo 1985). Once safely in the North, some migrants expressed their reasons for leaving through their letters to papers such as the *Chicago Defender*. The reasons for leaving included all of those listed above in addition to wanting to “contribute to the betterment of the race” (Griffin 1995). So instead of staying in the South and trying to change the inherently racist caste system that treated African Americans as no more than property, they left (Anderson 1988; Wilkerson 2010; Wiske and Graham 1993).

Many reasons have been given for the exodus of African Americans from the South. The reasons range from the lack of jobs and economic opportunities to the boll weevil infestation and the industrialization of farming (Anderson 1988; Griffin 1995; Wilkerson 2010; Wiske and Graham 1993). The one reason that is often glossed over by scholars but ever present in literary texts about the migration is violence (Griffin 1995). African Americans lived in constant fear of the random violence perpetrated by Whites. This type of violence was designed to keep the

South's white supremacist hierarchy intact with the Whites firmly seated at the top (Brown and Brown 2010; Leonardo 2004; Wilkerson 2010).

As an end destination for some and a pass-through spot for others, St. Louis was an important step on the journey northward for many African Americans. The movement was captured by an editorial in the *St. Louis Argus* that talked about the violent and unlivable conditions for the African American of the South as compared with the opportunities of the North including "better wages, better protection, better schools, and strong guarantees of his manhood and its constitutional privileges" ("Northward Movement of the Negro" 1916). Even the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* attributed the migration to the violence of the South and specifically the culture of lynching created by an unfair judicial system ("Motion on Negro Migration" 1917). Never a people to accept lectures by the North, a White southerner sent a letter to the editor telling the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* to "lay off lecturing the south" because they were capable of solving their own problems ("Negroes in the South" 1917).

Not only did students come from outside of Missouri to attend Sumner High School, but African American students from St. Louis County also took advantage of this educational opportunity. Through a Missouri state law established in 1889, school districts without African American schools were required to pay tuition to send students to neighboring districts where they could attend segregated schools. After the opening of the new Sumner High School in 1911, African American residents from the county enrolled in the school, some even paying their own tuition to attend. These tuition students along with the Southern migrants caused the enrollment numbers to swell beyond Sumner's capacity (Heaney and Uchitelle 2004).

Because of this influx of African Americans from both Southern states and St. Louis County, the schools designated for African Americans quickly became overcrowded. At the start

of 1918, Sumner High School, designed to hold 750 students, was bursting at the seams with over 900 students. The high school was not the only school experiencing growing pains with Simmons School also overcrowded by more than 300 students for a total enrollment of almost 1300 students (“Overcrowding at Sumner High School” 1918). The St. Louis Board of Education tried to deny the overcrowding by attributing it to migrant families who were in St. Louis for the warm weather, but would return home during the winter. However, data from the first semester quickly proved this theory false. Sumner High School lost a mere 29 pupils but gained 169 in January alone (“Sumner High is Overcrowded” 1918). Seizing the opportunity provided by the overcrowding, the Central School Patrons Association began lobbying the school board for a new high school to alleviate overcrowding at Sumner High School (Stevens 1927).

### **The Central School Patrons Association Resolutions**

Similar to the Colored Citizens Council, the Central School Patrons Association came together in 1922 to advocate for adequate facilities for African American children. A majority of the association was made up of men who had worked to fight the segregation ordinance in 1916. The men involved in both movements included attorneys Homer G. Phillips and George Vaughn, Dentist T. A. Curtis, newspaper editor J. E. Mitchell, and the association’s president, Reverend George Stevens of Central Baptist Church (“Central School Patrons Make a Statement of Case” 1922). Armed with information and a passion for equality, the Central School Patrons Association began a citywide campaign by speaking at local churches and issuing a series of resolutions to be sent to the St. Louis Board of Education (“Resolutions Sent to the School Bo’rd” 1922).

With eight resolutions the Central School Patrons Association started its demands by reminding the school board that they were asking only that the African American schools receive the same resources as other schools under its management. This reminder of educational equity had also been used by the Colored Citizens' Council in their proposal to the St. Louis Board of Education in 1907 and served as a gentle reminder that the African American community understood their legal right to a separate but equal education. In addition to the issue of equality, the next resolution illustrates the solidarity of the African American community as they endorsed a report by the St. Louis City NAACP. This report had been submitted to the School Board the previous year and had received no response (Resolutions Sent to the School Bo'rd 1922).

Because members of the Central School Patrons Association continued to realize the importance of teacher training, the next resolution requested a separate teacher's college that was not a part of Sumner High School, but one that was similar to Harris Teacher's College. The association recognized the good work of Frank Williams at Sumner, but also realized that in order for African Americans to receive an equal education, their teachers should be trained in the same manner as the teachers of White students. Not putting all of the responsibility for education on the schools, the next resolution asked the community to become more involved in education. It was a call to action not only to be aware of educational rights, but to be "alive at all times to our duty ("Resolutions Sent to the School Bo'rd" 1922).

The final resolution spoke to school district governance and asked for representation on the St. Louis Board of Education. Realizing that an African American school board member may not be well received, the Central School Patrons Association also stated that they were willing to include the selection of "broad-minded" individuals who would recognize that the interests of the races are better served by working together than working against each other

(“Resolutions Sent to the School Bo’rd” 1922). Signed by the Committee on Resolutions of the Central School Patrons Association, the resolutions received support the following week in the editorial page of the *St. Louis Argus*. Reminding the community of the recent tax increase, the editorial said the St. Louis Board of Education now had ample financial resources to meet the immediate needs laid out by the Central School Patrons Association and should act with a sense of urgency (“For School Improvements” 1922).

### **Central School Patrons Association Plan**

The Central School Patrons Association refined their eight resolutions into a final four-part plan that was presented to the Committee on Instruction of the St. Louis Board of Education in April. This plan addressed the issues of school capacity, health, transportation, and teacher training. Citing the creation of the Central School Patrons Association six months previously with community meetings at local churches, the plan pointed out that the current association was composed of representatives from each grade school. These representatives worked to keep the community apprised of the issues related to the schools and to garner their support for the association’s plan (“Better Schools Program Led by Dr. Stevens” 1922).

The first issue presented in the plan was the need for a new high school located East of Grand Avenue. Citing the enrollment numbers and capacity for Sumner High School, the plan also emphasized that more than 69 percent of the students lived East of Grand Avenue. It was for this reason that the association called for a new high school in this location. In addition to a new high school, the plan also called for a new open-air facility to help stem the rise of tuberculosis. The association thought the reason for this request was so obvious that it needed no further explanation (“Better Schools Program Led by Dr. Stevens” 1922).

The third issue was the movement of the seventh and eighth graders at John Marshall School back to the district schools. Designed in theory to provide a middle school for African American students in various districts, the Marshall School was not fulfilling its purpose. Of the students assigned to school districts other than St. Louis City, only a fraction of them actually attended. The families of these students were forced to incur additional expenses of almost six dollars per month associated with transportation and lunch fees. These additional costs were being paid by the people who could least afford to pay them while their taxes were supposed to provide their children with a free education (“Better Schools Program Led by Dr. Stevens” 1922).

The final request in the plan was for a separate teacher’s college for training African American teachers. While African Americans currently had a teacher training program it, was a part of Sumner High School and did not reflect the quality of instruction or facilities that were provided to White teachers at Harris Teacher’s College. This request had been made before in 1907 and had not been granted. Instead, African American teachers were given more substantial professional development and opportunities for classroom training (Colored Citizens 1907). Because of the importance of teacher training not only to student education, but to the development of the African American middle class, it remained an important issue (“Better Schools Program Led by Dr. Stevens” 1922).

Almost a month after presenting its plan to the St. Louis Board of Education, the Central School Patrons Association had yet to receive a response. More than five hundred parents met at Central Baptist Church to show their support for the plan and push the St. Louis Board of Education for a response. The plan was endorsed not only by parents but by more than forty community organizations, and over 5,000 individuals who signed on as supporters. Putting their

words into action, the Central School Patrons Association turned this meeting into an old-fashioned revival with spirited speakers making passionate pleas for action (“Citizens Want a High School East of Grand” 1922).

Attorney Homer G. Phillips opened the meeting by explaining the four propositions that had been presented to the St. Louis Board of Education, both in writing and in a formal presentation at a meeting. Following Phillips, Moses Hartman, a longtime juvenile judge of the Circuit Court, expressed his support for the plan. While the Central School Patrons Association was made up of men, women were involved in educational advocacy. The next speaker was such a woman, Mrs. W. P. Curtis. Ms. Curtis was a Curator at Lincoln University and the wife of committee member T. A. Curtis. She spoke of the poor conditions at Sumner High School due to overcrowding and the expenses being incurred by African American families to send their children to Marshall School (“Citizens Want a High School East of Grand” 1922).

Attorney George Vaughn spoke next, emphasizing his disappointment in the St. Louis Board of Education for ignoring the will of the African American community. Cheered on by the crowd, Vaughn continued by chastising the board’s decision to add twelve more classrooms to Sumner High School over the objections of the community. If the board recognized the need to add classrooms, it was admitting to the overcrowded conditions. Instead of listening to the community’s request for a long-term solution of a new school, they had decided on a short-term solution to add classrooms (“Citizens Want a High School East of Grand” 1922). The meeting continued with other speakers including a prominent White woman who was politically active in women’s issues. She too expressed her support for the plan and pledged to work towards the building of a new high school. This meeting was just one of the many that took place around the community, and all of them voiced displeasure with the St. Louis Board of Education’s lack of

response to the Central School Patrons Association plan (“Citizens Want a High School East of Grand” 1922).

Unrelenting in their approach, the Central School Patrons Association continued their campaign by holding more mass meetings around the city. The meetings were similar to the first with speakers declaring their support for the plan and being disheartened by the board’s lack of response and lack of respect (“Central School Patrons Make a Statement of Case” 1922).

Reporters at the *St. Louis Argus* added their voices to the outcry by asking why the St. Louis Board of Education had “refused to heed the appeals of ninety per cent of the parents of the Colored children in the city” (“The Appeal to the School Board” 1922).

After weeks of mass meetings, newspaper articles and editorial coverage, the St. Louis Board of Education granted a hearing to the Central School Patrons Association. With more than 150 people in attendance, George Stevens presented the Association’s plan to the board with assistance from Mrs. Julia Childs Curtis and Homer G. Phillips. Upon the conclusion of the presentation, the Board promised to give the matters discussed “careful and earnest consideration” (“School Board Gives Hearing to Committee” 1922).

Seeking to garner support for educational equity from the White community, the Central School Patrons Association wrote letters to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, who came out in support of the association’s plan (“Will the School Board Act?” 1922). Stevens began his letter by praising the newspaper for its sense of justice and reminding the readers (and the paper) that African Americans not only read the paper, but subscribed to it as well. He then followed these comments with the hard facts about the overcrowding at Sumner High School with a brief mention of the need for a teacher’s college (“New Negro High School Needed” 1922).



The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* told readers that all schools were overcrowded, both African American and White, and that the Central School Patrons Association was not asking for preferential treatment, just equal treatment. The editorial reminded the community that African Americans were tax-paying citizens and deserved justice and equity: “It is the duty of the Board of Education to the white population of St. Louis as well as the colored to deal justly and helpfully in providing educational facilities for the colored population” (“Will the School Board Act?” 1922).

Four years after articles about overcrowding at Sumner High School first started to appear and six months after the Central School Patrons Association plan was first introduced, the St. Louis Board of Education took the first steps to build a new African American school. The board purchased property east of Grand Avenue with the intent of razing the buildings and constructing a new school (“High School Site East of Grand Blv’d” 1922). Instead of being overjoyed with the news, the African American community was upset by rumors of a middle school being put in the location (“The School Board and the Citizens” 1922). The Central School Patrons Association was still waiting on a reply from the board after its presentation in June, and this delay just increased the African American community’s suspicion of the school board.

Almost a year after their first presentation to the St. Louis Board of Education, the Central School Patrons Association was before them again reiterating their earlier requests. This time speakers included the director of the Urban League and a representative from the Federation of Negro Women’s Clubs expounding on the poor conditions at Sumner High School and the need for properly trained teachers. In addition to the four requests in the previous plan, the association also presented the board with ten points that took the form of questions. The

questions probed the board's knowledge of African American migration into the city, the congestion at all of the African American schools, and the financial burden endured by families whose children were sent to Marshall School. There were also some philosophical questions that asked if African American students should have teachers with less training than the teachers of White students or if it was fair for African Americans to incur fees to pay for transportation when the same fees were not applied to Whites ("Citizens Have Hearing Before School Board" 1923).

The school board continued to delay responding to the Central School Patrons Association requests. Fed up with the outright dismissal of the community's concerns, the *St. Louis Argus* wrote a scathing editorial chastising the St. Louis Board of Education for not doing the job to which they were elected. Almost calling for legal action against the board, the editorial emphatically stated that the superintendent would have to admit under oath that he was providing separate accommodations, but they were far from equal. After more than a year of knowing the wishes of the community, the school board never provided an answer as to why the request was not considered, and this was seen as being both disrespectful and secretive ("The School Board Strikes Again" 1924).

Finally, in July of 1925, one of the Central School Patrons Association requests was met. A new open-air school housing 125 students would open in September. The purpose of this school was to educate not children with tuberculosis but instead those that were susceptible to the disease because of their weak conditions. Costing \$250,000, the new school was a small victory for the Central Patrons Association, but they were still waiting for word on a new high school east of Grand Avenue ("\$250,000 Open Air School to Start in Sept" 1925).

Less than two months after the announcement of the new open-air school, the Central School Patrons Association received the news they had been waiting to hear. The St. Louis Board of Education was building a new million dollar high school east of Grand Avenue. Described in elaborate detail, the new high school was to be one of the best in the country. Designed to hold 2,275 students, the school had thirty-one classrooms, four science laboratories, four domestic science rooms, five manual training shops, and an auditorium large enough to seat 1500 students (“New Million Dollar School is Underway” 1925).

The Central School Patrons Association had worked tirelessly for almost three years to convince the St. Louis Board of Education of the need for a second high school for African American students. Using data associated with the migration patterns from the South along with the residential patterns of the city, the Central School Patrons Association had presented an argument for a new high school east of Grand Avenue that was hard to refute. In the first school yearbook the graduating class reflected on what it meant to be in the first graduating class of Vashon High School. Their words reflect not only what they hoped to accomplish as graduates, but what the men of the Central School Patrons Association had achieved to get them there:

Being a first grad, make[s] me redouble my energy and fight for a place in life. That I by my example might show other incoming Vashon students possibilities and opportunities no matter how hard the battles of life might be, I shall never forget the duty that I as well as the rest of the graduates owe to our Dear Young Mater, Vashon Hi (sic). (*The Vashon Herald* 1928)

## **Conclusion**

The two African American citizens’ councils described in this chapter demonstrate the advocacy of the St. Louis African American community in securing educational advancements for their

children. Starting before they were even free, African Americans joined together to insist on a voice in the educational process that would uplift the next generation and put them on the path to citizenship. Working around the legal and social obstacles placed in their way, the citizens' councils were diligent and strategic as they found ways to create opportunities for African Americans in a society that continued to restrict their rights because of the color of their skin.

#### **Chapter 4: Social and Political Climate in St. Louis from 1865 to 1907**

In order to take advantage of their newfound freedom, many African Americans embarked upon a path towards an education—not an easy road for America’s newest citizens due to embedded societal racism and legislative roadblocks created to prevent them from reaching their goal. Instead of giving up their dreams of an education, not only for themselves but for future generations, African Americans joined together to advocate for their rights (Gates et al. 2012). In St. Louis, these groups of men were African American citizens’ councils who started before the end of the Civil War to pave the way for educational equity.

Inspired by David Walker’s *Appeal*, the term *citizens’ council* came into use in the 1830s. The term had a dual meaning for the African American community. The first meaning reflected their ability to create institutions that supported their survival by uniting the community. These institutions included newspapers, religious organizations, and social organizations designed to give African Americans a sense of belonging in a society that legally excluded them from participation in public life (Kantrowitz 2012). The second meaning was more intangible and harder to achieve without acceptance by the White community. In order to truly be considered citizens, there needed to be “bonds of trust and even love across the color line” (Kantrowitz 2012, 5).

Aside from community survival and love, the term *citizens’ council* questioned the very definition of citizenship. To be a citizen in the United States of America was to be legally and politically vested. This meant that African Americans were protected under the law and entitled to participate in the system of governance (Kantrowitz 2012). Written in 1829, Walker’s *Appeal* predated the Supreme Court decision *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which affirmed that African

Americans had no rights the White man was required to respect (Ehrlich 1974; Primm 1998).

The three St. Louis citizens' councils all came into existence after the Dred Scott decision, but still considered themselves citizens' councils even though they did not have the same rights guaranteed to White citizens.

The specific right that moved St. Louis African American citizens' councils to form and act was the right to an education. Similar to David Walker, the people of St. Louis believed they would create the future through education and not violent revolution (Kantrowitz 2012). Starting with the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, moving to the Colored Citizens' Council, and concluding with the Central School Patrons Association—the fight for educational equity was the cornerstone that would build a new society that accepted African Americans as equal citizens.

The path to citizenship for African Americans was not as easy as achieving the right to vote, the right to possess land, and the right to an education. All of these rights were battles fought with the U.S. legal system and specifically the U.S. Constitution and its interpretation during specific times in history. Three cases in particular defined African American life during the periods of the African American citizens' councils. These cases were *Dred Scott v. Sanford* in 1857, *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, and a local case on segregation in 1916. Though the cases occurred in different time periods and dealt with different issues, they had one thing in common, the suppression of African Americans and their rights as citizens.

The suppression of African Americans, also described as racism or white supremacy, lies at the center of critical race theory (Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Ladson-Billings 1998; Lynn and Jennings 2009). Critical race theorists study systems to discover how race is used in the allocation of resources (Douglass Horsford 2011). In the case of the African American citizens'

councils the system was education and their fight was for equal resources with their white peers. The struggle for educational equality was not the primary focus of the three legal cases above, but their decisions had consequences that affected every area of African American life. From the determination of citizenship to “separate but equal,” the court cases revealed the deeply entrenched racial attitudes of the time and supported three of the tenets of critical race theory: *permanence of racism*, *critique of liberalism*, and *whiteness as property* (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Frazier 1935; Ladson-Billings 1998; Leonardo 2004; Morris 2004; Yosso 2005).

In an effort to understand the African American citizens’ councils in relationship to the legal landscape of their time period, I made connections among the important legal cases listed above and the citizens’ councils. The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was examined in regard to the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. The Colored Citizens’ Council was reviewed using the decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. For the final council, the Central School Patrons Association, I used the only local case, the segregation law of 1916, to study how the city’s climate affected its work, strategy, and outcome.

In order to provide the framework for the links between the citizens’ councils and the legal cases, I begin this chapter with a discussion of critical race theory and provide overviews of the three tenets, permanence of racism, critique of liberalism, and whiteness as property. Following the tenets are the cases of Dred Scott and Homer Plessy and their influence on the work of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools and the Colored Citizens Council. The final case, the segregation ordinance of 1916, is explored in the following chapter along with its effect on the strategy of the Central School Patrons Association. At the conclusion of my discussion of each legal case and citizens council review is an analysis of their connection to the critical race theory tenets mentioned above.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory is grounded in the belief that race remains an integral part of the American experience. Intentionally constructed purely out of a social concept, race is used to maintain a racial hierarchy with Whites at the top and African Americans at the bottom (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Leonardo 2004; Lipsitz 2011; Gates et al. 2012). This racial hierarchy is used to determine access to and allocation of resources creating inequity for African Americans and denying them their basic civil and human rights. Critical race theory uncovers the racist underpinnings of American society through tenets designed to expose America's ongoing reliance on race to maintain a racial status quo that benefits Whites while penalizing African Americans (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Franklin 2002; Gates et al. 2012; Leonardo 2004). These tenets, permanence of racism, critique of liberalism, and whiteness as property, reflect American society's historical struggle with race and its unwillingness to make real and permanent change resulting in racial equality.

## **Permanence of Racism**

America may have been "founded" by Christopher Columbus, but it was built on the blood, sweat, and tears of captured and enslaved Africans who worked tirelessly to create a country for others to enjoy. Through the free labor of slavery, Whites were able to economically prosper and design systems that allowed them to grow their money and pass it on to future generations to create a system of unchecked wealth and entitlement based on skin color (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Gates et al. 2012; Zamudio et al. 2011). This socially constructed idea of racial superiority created a lasting attitude that embedded itself in the American landscape and became a part of everyday life.



*Racism* is defined as systems, structures, and customs that uphold and sustain oppressive group relationships, status, income, and educational attainment. As if the exclusionary foundation of racism is not enough, it is also an idea that is intentionally designed to last beyond a generation or two to become a permanent aspect of society (Ladson-Billings 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lipsitz 2011; Lynn and Jennings 2009; Dixson and Rousseau 2005). The permanent nature of racism allows it to adversely affect the social, cultural, and political lives of millions of African Americans while White Americans thrive within a system designed to safeguard their success. Racism became normal and natural in America and is now standing operating procedure (Ladson-Billings 1998; Bell 1992; Hacker 1992; West 1993).

One example of racism's permanence in society is the lack of African American history in school curriculums. Using White history as the normative history, school authorities left the histories of African Americans out of school curriculums both North and South of the Mason Dixon line (Dagbovie 1993; Salzman et al. 1996; White 2002; Woodson 1926). This blatant omission reflected society's enduring belief that African Americans made few societal contributions to society worthy of documentation and dissemination. By not sharing the accomplishments of African Americans with students, schools denied African American students a feeling of self-worth and reinforced white superiority in White students (Dagbovie 1993; Dreer 1968b; Morris 2004).

Recognizing the importance of African American contributions to society, historian Carter G. Woodson through the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) started Negro History Week in 1926. The purpose of Negro History Week was to tell the truth about African Americans and their contributions to society. According to Wesley (1951), Woodson was a "disseminator of the truth." He believed that "Ye shall know the truth

and the truth would make you free” (24). Woodson sought to spread the truth through the establishment of Negro History Week (Dagbovie 1993; Dreer 1968 Wesley 1951). He also felt the best way to circulate information about African American history was to provide the information to school teachers to use in their curriculums throughout the year. In a way, it was the first African American movement that was focused solely on the youth and involved them in their own emancipation (Dagbovie 1993).

Similar to the curriculums of today, the school curriculums in the 1920s did not provide African American students with true representations of their role in history. Woodson accentuates this point when he states that “if a race has no history, it has no worth-while traditions, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world and it stands in danger of being exterminated” (Woodson 1926, 239). Woodson goes on to say that he believes mis-education caused race prejudice and if everyone Black and White were taught the contributions of all people in society, there would be an appreciation of all cultures (Woodson 1926). As Dreer states in his meditations, “There are good people and bad people in every race” (Dreer 1937, 7).

The philosophy behind the creation of Negro History Week and the ASALH was the belief that African Americans had a strong history that not only should be taught to students and adults, but should be valued as an integral part of American history. Dr. Herman Dreer showed dismay at the lack of knowledge of African American students in his article in the *St. Louis Argus*, “The Education of the Negro with Respect to his Background” (1934). Written eight years after the first Negro History Week, the article showed Dreer’s continuing concern about the lack of African American history students received in school.

Expressing timeless thoughts, Dr. Dreer lamented that African Americans students had a rich knowledge of White history at the expense of their own history. He came to this conclusion by administering a survey to over 500 seniors at Sumner and Vashon High Schools in St. Louis and Lincoln High School in East St. Louis. The survey asked the students to identify certain historical figures. Of the African American figures listed, only a few were correctly identified by students.

<b>Correct Identification by Students</b>	<b>Historical Figures</b>
432	Thomas Edison
268	Napoleon Bonaparte
393	George Washington
304	Ulysses S. Grant
421	Cab Calloway
107	George Washington Carver
150	W.E.B DuBois
114	James Weldon Johnson
87	Benjamin Banneker

These results proved to Dreer that there was still much work to be done in educating African American students on their history. Dr. Dreer believed that knowledge of the rich history and contributions by African Americans would help inspire African Americans to believe in their self-worth and have faith in their future. Through Negro History Week, Dr. Dreer sought to instill this knowledge both inside and outside of the classroom (Dreer 1934).

Many school systems throughout the country took up the charge and worked hard throughout the year to implement a successful Negro History Week. The weeks took different forms depending upon the school district, but most of them included lectures, musical performance, plays, and literature all by African Americans (Salzman et al. 1996). In the annual reports of the ASALH, there were summaries from other urban centers such as Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh that conveyed the success of Negro History Week. Not only were school districts involved, but social service agencies, institutions of higher learning, and

churches were called into action to support the activities of Negro History Week (Woodson 1928).

The exclusion of African American history from school curriculums is just one example of how racism is embedded in the founding and fabric of the country. Instead of providing accounts of historical events that included all stakeholders, the education system chose to focus on the achievements of White men, which reinforced white supremacy and firmly implanted racism into educational structures, policies, and practices. Therefore, education is not the great equalizer that made it possible for all citizens to achieve the American dream if they worked hard enough. This mythical dream is based on a meritocracy that ignores the racial landscape of oppression upon which it is built (Zamudio et al. 2011). The idea of a liberal and free society existed in America, but never for African Americans. It is this idea of liberalism that scholars of critical race theory continue to critique to expose its harm to the African American community.

### **Critique of Liberalism**

For critical race theorists the term *liberalism* meant having individual political and property rights that allowed people to pursue their interests without government interference (Zamudio et al. 2011). In the words of the United States Declaration of Independence, these interests would be the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This idea of liberalism taken from the Enlightenment era created a false picture of a society that was governed by policies and laws that were fair and allowed people to succeed or fail based purely on their own merits (Douglass Horsford 2011; Ladson-Billings 1998; Lipsitz 2011; Zamudio et al. 2011). Scholars of critical race theory (CRT) took issue with the idea of liberalism because it ignored the inherent racism in the policies and practices resulting from inequitable relationships of power. By questioning the path to the American dream through their critique of liberalism,

critical race theorists depicted the historical role race played in a country built on the premise of justice for all (Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Gates et al. 2012).

The misuse of liberalism as equality is apparent in the remedies prescribed by the legal system to cure a system built on injustice. Considered to be “color blind” by its creators and interpreters, the U.S. legal system supports laws that remove legal barriers, but does not require equal distribution of resources (Douglass Horsford 2011). An example of such a decision and its continued consequences is *Oliver Brown et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (*Brown v. Board of Education*). Decided in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* struck down the segregation law established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which stated that segregation was legally acceptable as long as it was equal. It was satisfactory to require African Americans to drink from separate water fountains, ride in separate train cars, and attend separate schools as long as those accommodations were equal to those of Whites. The Supreme Court removed the legal barrier of segregation, but did not reallocate the resources necessary to shift the balance of power to a more equitable level between African Americans and Whites (Douglass Horsford 2011; Gates et al. 2012; Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Zamudio et al. 2011; Ladson-Billings 1988).

Stemming from the idea of the removal of legal barriers is the notion that the country had moved into a state of color blindness that allowed all people equal access and opportunity. In other words, because of the advancements made by African Americans since the Civil War, race is no longer a stumbling block to achievement (Gates et al. 2012; Zamudio et al. 2011).

According to this notion African Americans could attend schools with Whites, sit in the same waiting rooms with Whites, and even marry Whites if they chose. Referring back to the myth of liberalism, America is a utopia with endless opportunities for those willing to work hard and

climb the ladder to success. Segregation by race created the problems experienced by African Americans and by merely mandating desegregation the problem is solved.

If only the solution to over 200 years of enslavement and then 100 more years of legally sanctioned discrimination were as easy as desegregation. Critics of liberalism believe that judicial remedies such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and affirmative action may have corrected a legal wrong, but these remedies do not address the institutional and societal racism that continues to work in educational institutions. Continuing to proclaim color blind strategies as the solution to problems created by the use of color has denied the permanence of race and upheld America as a liberal utopia based on meritocracy.

### **Whiteness as Property**

The notion of a liberal America based on meritocracy does not take into account the societal property rights connected to Whites. Race and property rights have been connected throughout history. From enslaved people being considered property, similar to cattle, to only white property-owning men being allowed to vote, property has taken on different meanings depending upon race. As described in the tenet of permanence of racism, whiteness became the standard from which all other cultures, ideas, and people were judged. Using color as the litmus test allowed whiteness to emerge on top and create a sense of entitlement for all that possessed it (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Douglass Horsford 2011; Ladson-Billings 1998; Lipsitz 2011; Zamudio et al. 2011).

CRT Scholar Jessica DeCuir-Gunby defines *whiteness as property* as having access to three types of rights. These rights are the right of use and enjoyment, the right of reputation, and the right to exclude. These three types of rights granted to Whites because of their skin color are a type of property not only that they enjoyed, but that is passed down through the generations to

continue the exclusivity of Whiteness. Examination of each of these rights reveals a pattern that confirms the power of whiteness and the measures taken to maintain its privileges.

The property right of use and enjoyment positions whiteness as a resource that is used and experienced in order to maintain certain privileges. Because of its duality, whiteness is both intangible and tangible—intangible in the way that whiteness allows one to assert power and tangible in the use of financial resources to accumulate material possessions (DeCuir-Gunby 2006). An example of the right of use and enjoyment is evident in the African American's citizens' councils' struggles for adequate school buildings.

In both the Colored Citizens' Council proposal as well as the Central School Patrons Association, the major request to the school board was the building of a new school for African American students. As African Americans were migrating into St. Louis and being pushed into crowded schools, Whites enjoyed spacious schools with unlimited resources (Colored Citizens 1907). Because they controlled the school board, Whites had the power to determine when and where new schools were built and how much money was spent on the new schools. In regard to the new Sumner High School completed in 1911, it was built at a cost that was 50% less than the cost of McKinley High School, a school for Whites built just a couple of years earlier (Colored Citizens 1907). This discrepancy in cost reflects the use and enjoyment principle because Whites were able to use their power and resources to build schools while African Americans did have this same advantage.

Continuing in this time period, the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* also demonstrates the right of use and enjoyment. Described in more detail in the next section of this chapter, *Plessy v. Ferguson* established legal segregation and popularized the term “separate but equal” (Ficker 1999; Groves 1951; Levy and Philips 1951). The case, based on a transportation case from

Louisiana, recognized the White community's rights to enjoy accommodations apart from the African American community. The rights expressed in *Plessy v. Ferguson* dealt with social rights as opposed to political rights such as voting. Legally the accommodations were supposed to be equal, but in reality they were far from equal (Ficker 1999; Groves 1951). Whites enjoyed better seats on trains and buses, better bathroom facilities, and most importantly, better schools—all due to their whiteness and the resources it afforded them. The lack of equality laid the groundwork for the overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson* more than 50 years later in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The second principle of whiteness as property is the right of reputation. For Whites this meant the right to an unearned positive reputation at the expense of establishing African Americans as inferior. Because of the privileges associated with whiteness it becomes more socially desirable than Blackness and even more important to protect white identity. In order for Whites to maintain their socially constructed reputation as superior, they had to ensure that African Americans remained inferior. In terms of education, this right of reputation manifested itself in the creation of African American colleges and universities. Founded primarily by White Northern religious missionary associations, the first African American institutions of higher learning promoted a technical curriculum that maintained the racial status quo (Anderson 1988; Beale 1934; Holmes 1934; Jackson 1925; Messick 1947; Redcay 1937). Instead of teaching African American students to rise above their station in life, these institutions taught them how to stay within society's prescribed boundaries. This lack of social mobility for African Americans guaranteed that Whites would continue to outpace them in education and accumulation of resources to the point that they could never catch up, let alone surpass them.



The degradation of African Americans was at the center of the St. Louis City segregation law of 1916. This law proposed residential segregation in the city by legally preventing African Americans and Whites from living on the same block (Primm 1998). Many of the arguments made by supporters of the law spoke to the idea of white superiority and the desire to prevent race mixing. If Whites and African Americans were allowed to reside next door to each other it would be difficult for Whites to claim superiority and maintain the white identity that garnered them unearned resources including better housing stock.

The final principle of whiteness as property is the right to exclude. The concept of exclusion is apparent in the African American citizens' councils' requests as well as the three court cases. The right to exclude is as basic as it sounds. It is the right to withhold resources, opportunities, and access based on race. On the flip side it also then means the right to include and confer resources based on race as is described in the principle of right of reputation (DeCuir-Gunby 2006; Zamudio et al. 2011). This principle rests at the heart of segregation and explains why it was able to endure in a country founded on personal liberty and freedom.

When examining all three African American citizens' councils, we see that the request for school integration was blatantly absent. Never do the men of the council ask for African American students to attend schools with White students. Instead their requests deal with equity issues and obtaining what they believe they were guaranteed in the eyes of the law, whether it was state or federal law. The right to exclude was not something that rested only with the White school boards of each era. This right to exclude was passed down to each generation of Whites through the laws and policies they established to maintain their property rights. The right to exclude was written into the law of the land by the White courts that validated laws pertaining to African American citizenship and segregation.

The three cases examined for this narrative are *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and the segregation law of 1916. All embodied at their core the right for Whites to exclude African Americans. In *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, the court excluded African Americans from any rights of federal citizenship guaranteed to Whites under the Constitution of the United States. Though the Constitution made no mention of race in regards to granting of citizenship rights, the Supreme Court interpretation was cloaked in the language of white inclusion and black exclusion. The case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* followed this precedent of exclusion by establishing legal segregation based on race. While St. Louis did not have the entire slate of *de jure* segregation laws of its Southern neighbors, it did enforce social segregation in movie theaters, libraries, and lunch counters through *de facto* means. The right to exclude extended beyond the power of the legal system and in the case of St. Louis was able to exist without the laws to enforce it. The final case, the St. Louis City segregation law of 1916, sought to legally exclude African Americans from certain city neighborhoods (Primm 1998). This residential exclusion sought legally created neighborhoods in the city that would be left to deteriorate because the residents would not have the political or social power to insist they be maintained.

The three tenets of critical race theory, permanence of racism, critique of liberalism, and whiteness as property all worked together to create a system of white racial supremacy that preserved the status quo. The African American citizens' councils worked within this racially charged system to construct ways to improve African American education. Though each council was working in the same place, the city of St. Louis, each was working in a different time period under a different legal interpretation of state and federal laws related to African American citizenship and rights. Through the examination of each citizen's council in relationship to a

specific court case, an expanded picture develops of the civic environment facing the councils as they fought for educational improvements and equity.

*Dred Scott v. Sanford* and the **St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools**

By the time Dred Scott sued for his freedom, over 200 slaves had taken the same journey to the courthouse in St. Louis. Though definitely the most famous freedom suit case, Dred Scott followed in the path of many other slaves fighting for their freedom based on their residence in a free state at some point during their enslavement. Between the years of 1806 and 1865 over 78 slaves won their freedom under such a law, and Scott hoped to do the same (Moore 1993).

The case upon which Scott based his quest for freedom was *Winnie v. Whiteside*, which originated the argument of residence in a free state before moving on to reside in a slave state. In the case of *Winnie v. Whiteside*, as with most of the St. Louis cases, Winnie claimed her master brought her to Illinois before moving to St. Louis. Because Illinois was a free state, Winnie sued in the St. Louis circuit court to gain not only her freedom, but the freedom of her nine children and one grandchild. The children's condition was tied to the condition of their mother, and if Winnie was declared free, her children would follow (Moore 1993).

Decided in 1822, *Winnie v. Whiteside* established the precedent for all of the freedom suits that followed. Based upon wording in the Northwest Ordinance forbidding slavery in Illinois, the decision spoke to the dilemmas of enforcing laws across state lines. In this case the court determined that the laws that forbid slavery in Illinois could be enforced in Missouri. This deference of the court to the laws of Illinois continued for the next few decades and was the catalyst for many enslaved people filing suit in St. Louis (Moore 1993).

By the time Dred Scott and his wife Harriet arrived in St. Louis in 1846 and entered their claim for freedom, the composition of the Missouri State Supreme Court had shifted to a

majority of pro-slavery justices. This shift in the court along with the state court's stressing their own laws instead of the laws of other states diminished the number of suits being filed to a low of only one or two per year (Moore 1993). While the Scotts were in the right place to sue for their freedom, they were there at the wrong time in history. The Dred Scott decision of the Missouri State Supreme Court in 1852 made it no longer possible for enslaved people to sue for their freedom based on their prior residence in a free state.

The Dred Scott case, as it is known today, actually started as a Missouri state case in 1846 with the case of *Dred Scott v. Irene Emerson*. This first case was appealed twice up to the Missouri State Supreme Court in 1852. At the same time this case was in litigation, a second Dred Scott case was being entered into the courts. The basic argument of the second case was that Scott's owners had held him in bondage in Illinois, a free state, and he was therefore entitled to his freedom. Scott was encouraged to seek legal action by the Blow family, who grew up with Scott and would later grant him his freedom, and his case traveled through the court system, finally arriving at the door of the United States Supreme Court (Ehrlich 1974; Moore 1993; Primm 1998; Gates et al. 2012).

The key question of fact in the Dred Scott case dealt with the concept of citizenship and if African Americans were considered citizens. Central to this question of citizenship was the issue of property rights and its unbreakable ties to slavery. In his majority opinion delivered on March 5, 1857, Chief Justice Robert Brook Taney made two points very clear. First, enslaved African Americans were property with no rights that had to be recognized or respected by the White man. Second, the United States Congress had no power over slavery in the states because slaves were considered property by the Federal Constitution, which made it a state issue (Ehrlich 1974; Gates et al. 2012; Moore 1993; Primm 1998).

Because of the importance of the case to the African American community, the decision and its future implications for the race were front-page news in the African American press. The *National Era* out of Washington, D.C. actually reprinted parts of the decision including the dissenting opinion and editorial remarks by the newspaper (“Decision of the Supreme Court in the Case of Dred Scott” 1857). The sections pertaining to citizenship and state’s rights are extracted below:

In regards to citizenship, the Chief Justice held that Negroes and descendants of Negroes in this country were not citizens of the Political community, associated under the Articles of Confederation or Under the Constitution at the time of its formation. That “unhappy race” was universally regarded throughout the civilized world, as property, subject to be bought and sold, as merchandise, not constituting an integral element of society....The right of property in slaves is equally secured by the Constitution with other property rights. No matter what it may be considered by the Law of Nations, that Law cannot come between the citizens holding slaves, and the Federal Constitution that recognises (sic) them as property. (“Decision of the Supreme Court in the Case of Dred Scott” 1857, 4, 6)

Even in the court’s dissenting opinion, the legality of slavery rested in the states and not the federal government. The court believed that slavery was governed by the state which established it by law. In other words, because Missouri established slavery in its State Constitution, the federal court did not have the power to override state law. The opinion also disagreed with the classification of slaves as property and whether the case should even have been brought before the U.S. Supreme Court in the first place because of its refusal to recognize the Constitution of Illinois. In all of their reasons for ruling in Dred Scott’s favor, not once did

the dissenting justices refer to his rights as a citizen of the United States. Though they disagreed on the outcome of the case, all of the justices agreed that African Americans did not retain citizenship rights in the hallowed halls of the federal government (“Decision of the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott Decision” 1857; Gates et al. 2012; Ehrlich 1974).

By denying the federal citizenship of African Americans, the U.S. Supreme Court maintained the country’s foundation of institutional racism and solidified the rights of the state to make decisions of social equality. Unlike civil and political rights, which would elicit a federal response for action, social rights were the purview of the states. Supported by the Fourteenth Amendment, states were permitted to utilize race when determining to what extent African Americans enjoyed the rights associated with state citizenship (Gates et al. 2012). Education was one of the social rights that was left up to the states to administer, and many created segregated systems based on race.

The establishment of state-funded schools for African Americans in Missouri began with a suggestion. The 1865 State Constitution declared that separate schools “may” be established for children of African descent. Through the use of the word “may” the state displayed little commitment to providing schools and recognized this fact ten years later when the wording was changed to “shall” establish schools. This change in wording shifted African American education from an option to a mandate from the state (Savage 1931). Almost ten years before the state mandated the education of African American students, the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was working hard not only to establish schools, but to control them as well.

### **The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools**

Established seven years after the Dred Scott decision, The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools came into being during a time of local and national conflict on the issue of race. While the American Missionary Association arrived in Missouri in 1858, the board was not established until 1864 (Evans 1938; Richardson 1975). In 1864 the United States was still embroiled in a civil war over the institution of slavery and its future in the growing republic. Set against this backdrop of domestic unrest and uncertainty about the future, the African American community took their first steps towards freedom by insisting on control of their schools.

As mentioned earlier, the Dred Scott decision denied African Americans federal citizenship rights and stated that if African Americans had any rights at all they would be granted by individual state constitutions. At the time of this decision, the Missouri Compromise of 1820 had been established by the U.S. Congress with Missouri entering the Union as a slave state and Maine a free state. The decision that Dred Scott did not gain his freedom by living in Illinois, a free state, invalidated the Missouri Comprise by enforcing slavery as a condition not altered upon change in geography (Primm 1998).

With the Dred Scott decision hanging over the country like a noose waiting to deprive African Americans of their rights, the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools carefully wrote their own constitution outlining their rights in regard to school management and leadership. Recognizing the tenor of the country, the board did not advocate for radical reforms such as integrated schools, but instead focused their requests on creating educational equity within the parameters of the segregated system.

The rights laid out in the board's constitution went against social norms but did not constitute any legal challenges. For example, the request to hire African American teachers and

administrators did not violate any state law. Instead, this request violated the social norms created by the permanence of racism that deemed African Americans unfit for the classroom (Anderson 1988; Richardson 1975; Williams 1920; Williams 2005). The board also sought to expand educational opportunities through the state and not limit their work to St. Louis. Again, because it was now legal to provide African Americans with an education, this request was not seen as a challenge to the powers of the state constitution.

The reasons for the African American community to forgo legal challenges to achieve educational equity were found in the Dred Scott decision. First, the decision denied African Americans citizenship rights under the U.S. Constitution. Without the right to citizenship it was hard to argue for the rights associated with citizenship. In addition to denying federal citizenship for African Americans the court also determined that any rights granted to African Americans were done so under their state constitutions. In the case of Missouri, African Americans did not have a right to a state-supported education until 1865, and at this point the AMA schools were absorbed by the St. Louis Public Schools. The final reason legal recourses were not considered was the conservative nature of the state supreme court. As mentioned in regard to the timing of Dred Scott's suit, the court had shifted from a liberal interpretation of the law that allowed the acceptance of other state's laws to apply in Missouri to a more stringent reading of the law that applied the laws of Missouri above those of other states. This shift created a legal environment that was unfavorable to African American litigation around issues of citizenship and interrelated rights.

Recognizing the societal and legal parameters placed on them because of the Dred Scott decision, the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools focused their requests on preparing African Americans to be viewed by White society as having the content of character



worthy of citizenship. Through education African Americans would gain the knowledge that would make them welcome as contributing members of the new society. By insisting on their own teachers, the board was also creating a professional class within their own ranks to help guide the race towards the uncharted path of citizenship. The board did not begin their quest for freedom by feverishly fighting to proclaim their citizenships rights. Instead, they focused on creating a system that unobtrusively challenged racial inferiority against the rising tide of white supremacy that would come to a head in 1896 with the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

### ***Plessy v. Ferguson* and the Colored Citizens' Council**

Similar to *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* was not an isolated struggle in the Africa American community to acquire equality. Although the case was credited with popularizing the term “separate but equal,” it was actually an education case in Boston, Massachusetts, that served as precedent for the landmark decision. *Roberts v. City of Boston* in 1849 developed the foundation that was used almost fifty years later to declare segregation that was already socially acceptable, legally acceptable (Bishop 1977; Ficker 1999; Kantrowitz 2012; Levy and Philips 1951).

### ***Roberts v. City of Boston***

Benjamin Roberts lived in a Boston district with at least five elementary schools designated for Whites only. Instead of having his five-year-old daughter walk past these five schools every day to attend the one African American school in his district, Roberts decided to test the legality of segregation based on race and filed suit against the school district. This was not Robert's first foray into the struggle to end segregation in Boston. Roberts had been a recognized leader in the fight to end segregation years earlier with his support of a petition ending racially exclusive schools. Though the petition was rejected by the school committee, it

pushed Roberts to continue his fight against segregation and make it personal (Ficker 1999; Kantrowitz 2012; Levy and Philips 1951).

Roberts sued the city of Boston under an 1845 Massachusetts law that allowed students who were illegally excluded from public schools to recover monetary damages. To aid in his fight against segregation, Roberts hired attorney Charles Sumner. Sumner was a son of Boston's White upper class, but also an ally of the African Americans of Beacon Hill (Kantrowitz 2012). Sumner would later become a U.S. Senator and have his name given to the first high school west of the Mississippi for African American students. But in 1849, his job was to argue why segregation practiced in the Boston Public Schools violated the Massachusetts state constitution (Ficker 1999; Kantrowitz 2012; Levy and Philips 1951).

Sumner began his argument by addressing the language in the Massachusetts State Constitution. Specifically he argued that the law did not address issues of class or race, but indicated that the schools were for the instruction of children and did not require segregated learning environments. Sumner went on to argue the lack of equality of segregated schools. The Boston Public School Committee, the authority that made school assignments, painted an entire race with the brush of inferiority (Ficker 1999; Kantrowitz; 2012; Levy and Philips 1951). Called the "nobility of skin" by Sumner (Ficker 1999, 304), this generalization of racial inferiority reflected the permanence of racism that was alive and well even in the non-slave holding states. In conclusion, Sumner argued passionately against segregation by forecasting a nation that continued to separate people by race unless the government stepped in to end this societal affliction:

Nursed in the sentiment of Caste, receiving it with the earliest food of knowledge, they are unable to eradicate it from their natures...The school is the little world in which the

child is trained for the larger world of life. It must, therefore, cherish and develop the virtues and the sympathies which are employed in the larger world... Prejudice is the child of ignorance. It is sure to prevail where people do not know each other. (Levy and Phillips 1951, 514)

In spite of his passionate plea for an end to segregation, Sumner was unable to deliver his client a favorable verdict. The unanimous opinion of the court upheld the power of the school committee to make school assignments based on race. The court rejected the argument that Robert's daughter was excluded from the public schools because the city had a suitable African American school. It also affirmed the school committee's right to classify students based on race, religion, economic status, or national origin. According to the courts, the only legal right afforded to Sarah Roberts in the state constitution was for a public education funded by the city of Boston. The de facto law of segregation was seen as a social custom that did not require the interference of the law as long as the segregation adhered to the principle of "separate but equal" (Gates et al. 2012; Ficker 1999; Levy and Philips 1951).

### ***Plessy v. Ferguson***

The *Roberts v. City of Boston* case allowed the ideology of "separate but equal" to move from a socially constructed idea to one codified by law. From Roberts came a trajectory of cases testing the educational equity of state-mandated school segregation. In order to keep the issue out of the hands of the federal government and push it back to the state level, the Slaughterhouse Cases further interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution and its relationship to citizenship rights. Comprising local slaughterhouses, this case challenged an exclusive contract that had been given to one corporation to perform slaughtering responsibilities for twenty-five years. Citing health reasons for the granting of the monopoly, the case arrived at the Supreme

Court. Decided in 1873, the Slaughterhouse Cases declared there were two types of citizenship in the United States, state and federal. Each type of citizenship came with its own unique rights and guarantees. The Slaughterhouse Cases became the precedent that established schools as state entities immune to the rights guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment. In other words, the equal protection under the law of the Fourteenth Amendment did not apply to schools because they were under the jurisdiction of the state law and not the federal law. This type of legal maneuvering continued until the end of the nineteenth century and the watershed decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Ficker 1999; Groves 1951; Kluger 2004).

Even though the decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* was based on an educational equity case, the situation surrounding *Plessy v. Ferguson* had nothing to do with education. Instead it dealt with transportation issues in Louisiana. Homer Adolph Plessy, a man with one-eighth African blood and visibly Caucasian was assigned to the African American railroad car by train employees. Wanting to test the legality of Louisiana's law, the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* went up against the Fourteenth Amendment but lost because the state law did not require different accommodations, just separate accommodations based on race (Bishop 1977; Gates et al. 2012; Groves 1951). The decision of the court confirmed the continuation of the permanence of racism and the positive reputation of whiteness not only in the courts, but in society (Bishop 1977).

We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put the construction upon it. (Groves 1951, 66)

The Supreme Court's decision of "separate but equal" ushered in a new era in American race relations. When looking at St. Louis newspapers to examine their coverage of the case, I

found little information. There was one small article taking up about two inches of space announcing the decision (“Murder Suspected” 1896). This lack of interest in the decision reflected St. Louis’s continued schizophrenia around issues of race. At the time of the decision, the schools were legally segregated, but the streetcars were not. African Americans could ride the department store elevators with Whites, but could not sit next to them at lunch counters. The races also shared the same library but stayed in separate hotels and ate in separate restaurants. Missouri’s segregation was more social in nature and relied on de facto enforcement instead of the de jure enforcement found in the black codes of most other former slave states (Corbett 1983; Primm 1998). This environment of socially constructed segregation became the backdrop for the work of the men of the Colored Citizens’ Council in St. Louis.

### **The Colored Citizens’ Council**

With the ideology of separate but equal firmly implanted in the courts and classrooms of the nation, the men of the Colored Citizens Council joined together to advocate for educational improvements for African American students. Standing in the shadows of both Dred Scott and Homer Plessy, the councils used the “separate but equal” doctrine to their advantage by asking the St. Louis Board of Education to uphold the law and provide accommodations that equaled those of White students. This request came in the form of the 1907 *A Complaint with Illustrations to the Board of Education of St. Louis* and displayed the group’s knowledge of the segregation doctrine and how to use it to their advantage.

The *Complaint* addresses issues related to the location, condition, and educational environment of Sumner High School, opened in 1875 and named after Charles Sumner, the lawyer for *Roberts v. City of Boston* and a staunch abolitionist. The *Complaint* opens by addressing issues with the location of Sumner. Following arguments against its current location,

the *Complaint* states that it realizes that Sumner produced some fine students but that the council members were basing their complaints “in the view of the latest standards governing the Board in respect to other high and normal schools in the city” (Colored Citizens 1907, 4). In other words, the *Complaint* was based on the standard of “separate but equal,” and Sumner High School was not equal to the White high schools in the city. The *Complaint* shows this inequality by comparing Sumner High School to the nearby White high school, McKinley. It emphasizes segregation when it states of McKinley, “It is like entering another world. Yet this school is open to the poorest and the richest of our city’s youth, providing they belong not to the Hamitic branch of the human family” (Colored Citizens 1907, 6).

The Colored Citizens’ Council tried to appeal to the school board’s sense of altruism by asking them to have faith in the capabilities of the African American youth the same way they had faith in and supported the city’s immigrant population or in their words, “complex population” (Colored Citizens 1907, 7). Mentioning yet another new White high school on the horizon, the *Complaint* touched on the segregation law when it stated, “This is gratuitous injury to our colored youth which the law of the State condemns and the best sentiment of our city will not sanction” (Colored Citizens 1907, 7). It was hard to say if the city would rise up in protest against more White schools being built, but the Colored Citizens’ Council made it clear that they knew their rights when it came to the segregation laws.

The *Complaint* referred to the law one more time when it tackled the issue of teacher training. The council admitted that African American teachers faced difficult tasks in the classroom, but this difficulty was no different from those faced by White teachers. The problems were exacerbated because of the quality of the training provided to African American teachers. The Colored Citizens’ Council asked “to see Sumner’s high school and Normal course on equal

footing with that designed for the other youth of the city, not because the law of Missouri says it shall be equal, but because it *ought* to be equal” (Colored Citizens 1907, 10).

The repeated mention of a legal foundation for the Colored Citizens’ Council’s request displayed their knowledge not only of the law, but of the climate in which they were operating. There was no mention in the *Complaint* of school integration, an idea that would have been dismissed immediately by the board on legal grounds. Even though it was not written in the *Complaint*, the idea of school integration had been brought up publicly two years earlier by one of the authors of the *Complaint*, Reverend George Stevens of Central Baptist Church.

In a 1905 speech at Central Baptist Church celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Lloyd Garrison, Stevens advocated for social equality and co-education of the races. He exclaimed, “The time when all the odious wicked and discriminating laws at the South should be abolished is now. The time when every Jim Crow car should be sidetracked and burned is now (“Urges Negroes to Demand Equality” 1905). It was obvious that he was speaking to African Americans beyond the boundaries of Missouri because the state did not have segregated train cars.

In regards to education Stevens expressed the belief that segregation led to misunderstandings between the races and would ultimately prove harmful in the future:

It is a conviction with me that separation in education is largely responsible for the misunderstanding and estrangement between the races. In training the future citizen of the republic everything should be done to make them homogenous. Contentment and equality under just laws is a rich legacy to leave to posterity and this it is our duty to do. (“Urges Negroes to Demand Equality” 1905)

Not pushing the boundaries of social segregation too far, Stevens suggested that schools be segregated during the elementary school years but that students “meet in high schools, colleges, and professional schools” (“Urges Negroes to Demand Equality” 1905). This early call for integrated schools fell on deaf ears and did not resurface in the demands made by the Colored Citizens’ Council. This omission of desegregation indicated that the council knew that they had to stay within their legal boundaries if they were going to effect change. If the group had asked for school integration less than ten years after the Plessy decision, they would have failed and would have been unable continue advancing the cause of African American education in St. Louis.

Similar to the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, the Colored Citizens Council knew to work within the prescribed boundaries of the law when making their requests. Instead of being seen as complacent with the status quo, these actions should be seen as small steps taken to equip African Americans with the skills and refinements to be worthy of citizenship. Away from the eyes of Whites in segregated schools, churches, and social clubs, African Americans prepared themselves for a future that bestowed upon them the rights and privileges associated with federal citizenship.

## **Conclusion**

The cases of Dred Scott and Homer Plessy dealt with the intangible concept of citizenship that Whites made tangible by associating it with whiteness. Through the tenets of permanence of racism, critique of liberalism, and whiteness as property, critical race theory exposed how racism was used in institutions such as the law and education during different time periods to preserve the racial status quo. Even though the time periods span almost fifty years, the actions of the citizens’ councils and their results were very similar. By working within the



constraints of the law, the citizens' councils achieved small successes that did not threaten Whites, but provided the building blocks to create a legacy of advocacy and achievement in the African American community. This advocacy was tested at the local level when the city of St. Louis tried to enact a residential segregation law in 1916.

## **Chapter 5: The Social and Political Climate in St. Louis After 1910**

The decisions in the cases of Dred Scott and Homer Plessy continued America's inequitable treatment of African Americans by denying them protection under the federal legal system. Using the U.S. Constitution, and specifically the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court decided African Americans were not citizens under the federal law and had to turn to their state constitutions to determine certain citizenship rights. These federal cases changed the landscape in some parts of the country while just reinforcing it in others. In the case of St. Louis the fight against segregation started in little ways against things like field days in schools ("Again 'Jim Crowed'" 1916) or segregated days at the city pools ("Separate Hours to Continue at Fairground Pool" 1916). The fight turned into an organized protest when, in 1916, the city of St. Louis tried to pass two segregation ordinances.

The first ordinance was called the Initiative Petition for Control of Mixed Blocks Occupied by Both White and Colored People, consisting of eight sections. The second ordinance was the Initiative Petition for Segregation of White and Colored People and contained seven sections. As described by attorney George Vaughn in the *St. Louis Argus*, the ordinances made it illegal for African Americans to live on a block with Whites or to use buildings for places of assembly such as churches, dance halls, and schools ("Will Vote on Segregation on Feb. 29" 1915). The details of the ordinances will be explained in further detail throughout the chapter with an emphasis on the link between the segregation ordinances and the continued advocacy for African American schools.

For almost eight months, the African American community came together to advocate against the passing of the segregation ordinances. Designed to segregate St. Louis, the two ordinances dealt with housing issues in the city and hoped to limit the mobility of African

Americans by giving them access only to certain neighborhoods. The men leading the charge against the segregation ordinances were many of the same men who were involved in the petition to improve conditions at Sumner High School and had worked to build the new Vashon High School. The quality of housing and schools was connected, and if African Americans were segregated, they would inhabit poor housing stock and the schools that went with it. By working to prevent residential segregation, the St. Louis African American community continued their quest to gain access to resources that allowed them to move one step closer to equality.

### **The Segregation Ordinances of 1916**

In 1912, less than a year after the African American community celebrated the opening of the new Sumner High School, a committee was quietly formed to explore the idea of residential segregation. At the annual meeting of the St. Louis Real Estate Exchange, a committee was established in partnership with the local neighborhood associations and the United Welfare Association to explore a race ordinance similar to one in Baltimore. Named the Segregation Committee, this group joined other committees within the organization such as the Factory Location Committee, the Reception Committee, and the Public Improvement Committee (“Race Segregation Committee Named” 1912).

Exactly a year to the date of forming the Segregation Committee, the United Welfare Association took the lead in calling for a special election to bring legal residential segregation to St. Louis. Instead of working as individual organizations, the United Welfare Association sought strength in numbers as a way to advance the agenda of the St. Louis Real Estate Exchange. Under the auspices of the association, more than fifteen civic and ward organizations joined together to circulate petitions and raise the necessary funds for a campaign (“Special Election to Segregate City Negroes Planned” 1913). Many of these organizations had initiated legal action

in the past when they felt their neighborhoods were being encroached upon by African Americans seeking property for schools or parks. These White neighborhood associations feared the prospect of African Americans darkening the complexion of their neighborhoods and decreasing property values (“Negro’s Invasion Rouses Cote Brilliante Residents” 1910).

Seeking to raise \$6,000, the association planned to get pledges from supporters as they also tried to get the 35,000 votes necessary to call a special election. Even though it was two years before the official campaign took place, the association’s proposal outlined how the city would be divided along racial lines with blocks being defined as either White or African American. As mentioned above concerning school locations, the proposal included a provision that required all African American churches and schools to be located only on African American blocks. This direct statement concerning school location reflected the fight between the White neighborhood association and the St. Louis Board of Education over the location of the new Sumner High School explained in chapter two, which included legal action and attempts at eminent domain (“Special Election to Segregate City Negroes Planned” 1913).

The most thorough explanation of the proposed ordinances and their impact on the African American community was written in the *St. Louis Argus* by George L. Vaughn. A prominent member of the African American community and a staunch fighter for civil rights, Vaughn described the ordinances in language that allowed the community to grasp the dire consequences if they were to be passed. Similar to the repeated call by J. E. Mitchell, the paper’s editor, for the community to act on their own behalf or they would be acted upon, Vaughn’s straightforward description of the ordinances and the consequences rallied people to action (“Will Vote on Segregation Feb 29” 1915).

As mentioned previously there were two ordinances designed to segregate the city's residential neighborhoods. The ordinances had some similarities and a few differences, but both were harmful to the future of African Americans in St. Louis. Both ordinances deemed it illegal for Whites or Colored to live on a block or use a building for assembly in which the other race resided. One of the petitions defined "assembly" to include churches, schools, and dance halls. They both defined a city "block" as both sides of the street with the area defined as from the front of the lot to the back of the lot. Again, the petitions differed in how they decided White and Colored blocks. One petition defined the block by race if 100 percent of the race lived on the block. The other petition defined the block by race if 75 percent of the race lived on the block. If both ordinances passed, the 75 percent race requirement would be used to define the blocks. Regardless of the percentage, both petitions deemed it was fine for Whites to have businesses on Colored blocks and for servants to live on the premises of their employers ("Will Vote on Segregation Feb 29" 1915).

The most damaging of the provisions was found in section four of the first ordinance, the Initiative Petition for Control of Mixed Blocks Occupied by Both White and Colored People. This provision provided the method by which new blocks would be determined either White or Colored. In order to purchase property on an unoccupied block, a potential owner had to apply for a building permit and disclose which race would be occupying the building. The potential owner was then required to run an ad at his or her own expense twice a week for four weeks in both an English paper and a German paper. Using the same language from the ad, a notice was also placed on the building site. If 50 percent of the owners of the front footage of the block (on both sides of the street) protested, the permit was not granted and the property was not sold ("Will Vote on Segregation Feb 29" 1915).

As clarified by Vaughn, this provision was problematic for a few reasons. First, African Americans did not own enough real estate to make up 50 percent of the frontage that was needed to expand into different neighborhoods. Second, the cost associated with running two ads a week for four weeks was beyond the resources of many in the community. Finally, because of the prejudice associated with the segregation law, African Americans were unable to obtain permits. They were always voted down by the White majority (“Will Vote on Segregation Feb 29” 1915). Fearing the possibility of legal action, the framers of the ordinances put in a clause that if one part of an ordinance was declared illegal it did not invalidate the other parts. This meant if someone sued against one of the eight parts in the first ordinance and won, they would have to continue suing and winning against each part to strike down the entire ordinance. This type of legal action would take time and money that African Americans did not possess (“Will Vote on Segregation Feb 29” 1915).

Overall the purpose of the ordinances was to further advance the prosperity of the White community at the expense of the African American community. There were proponents of the law on both sides of the color line with the Jewish community and the editorial board at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* supporting the work of the local NAACP and the campaign committee. There were also White organizations that actively supported the bill such as the Welfare League, who claimed they were working in the best interest of both races by trying to keep them separate. These organizations and some individuals expressed their thoughts through articles, editorials and letters to the editor of the *St. Louis Argus* and the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* and helped illustrate the racial climate of the city as it decided the fate of its African American community.

### **The Campaign against the Segregation Ordinances**

The *St. Louis Argus* kicked off the campaign against the segregation ordinances on Friday, July 30, 1915 with a banner headline reading in all capital letters “Campaign Against Segregation Starts Monday” (1915). Advertised under the headline was the information for the first organizational meeting co-sponsored by the campaign committee and the local branch of the NAACP to be held at All Saints Episcopal Church on Monday, August 2, at 8pm. The meeting announcement was signed by the president and secretary of the campaign committee, Dr. John W. Day and William H. Osborne, respectively (“Campaign Against Segregation Starts Monday” 1915).

Serving in its ongoing journalistic role as advocate for the African American community, the *St. Louis Argus* sent out on its editorial page a call to action, saying it was “Time to Get Busy” (1915). By taking a leadership role on the campaign committee working with publicity, the *St. Louis Argus*’s managing editor, J. E. Mitchell, kept the issue in front of the African American community through weekly editorials and commentaries for the entire eight months of the campaign. Two weeks after the campaign announcement, an editorial predicted African American apathy would cause the measure to pass into law. It stated that the majority of Whites were either against segregation or indifferent. If the measure was to be defeated it was up to African Americans to be organized and to vote. The editorial ended with a financial appeal to “go deep into your pocket and give until you feel it (“Time to Do Something” 1915). From chastising the community to pleading for their support, Mitchell wrote diligently, pushing the community towards the voting booth, encouraging them to play a role in their future.

As mentioned above, many of the men involved in the campaign to defeat the segregation bill were also involved in the citizens’ councils advocating for educational equity. In addition to J. E. Mitchell, the campaign committee included Dr. T. A. Curtis, Homer G. Phillips, and

attorney George Vaughn. Religious leaders such as Rev. S. W. Parr, Rev. J. A. Rice and Rev. W. S. Books worked with the religious community to garner their support and defeat residential segregation based on race. One interesting difference between the campaign committee against segregation and the citizens' councils for educational equity was the inclusion of women. The campaign committee actually included two women on the finance committee, illustrating that behind the scenes women were playing a role in advocating for equality while the men took center stage ("N.A.A.C.P Opens Anti-Segregation Campaign" 1915).

As the Segregation Committee was just beginning to rally the community to fight segregation in the city, the city's Olympic Theater booked *The Birth of a Nation* for an extended run starting in late August. Written by Thomas Dixon, the movie was a fictional depiction of southern race relations before and after the Civil War. Because of exaggerated and racist portrayals of African Americans, many cities in the country prohibited its screening. The *St. Louis Argus* warned the community months before of the movie's potential to be shown in St. Louis and promised to act if that occurred ("*The Birth of a Nation* Coming" 1915). The screening of the movie in St. Louis at the start of the fight for residential segregation was a strategic coincidence that aided supporters of segregation because it drove Whites to the voting booths by playing upon their fear and ignorance of African Americans.

### ***The Birth of a Nation***

With the coming of *The Birth of a Nation*, the St. Louis African American community had to work twice as hard to fight segregation. While the campaign committee continued its work trying to defeat the segregation ordinances, some of its members did double duty by also working to keep the film out of St. Louis. Attempts to ban the film had been successful in other urban cities such as Oakland, California, through the work of dedicated citizens opposed to



spreading misinformation and hate about African Americans (“Oakland Puts Ban on *The Birth of a Nation*” 1915).

Turning to the city’s police department to prevent the film’s screening in St. Louis, the recreation head of the city’s parks department filed an objection with the Board of Police Commissioners. Citing the topic of the film as dealing with the period of Reconstruction, Miss Rumbold objected to showing the film, saying that because “St. Louis is a city where the sentiment between the North and the South was narrowly divided, it would be inadvisable to present such a show” (“*The Birth of a Nation* Coming” 1915). The argument used by the city to prevent the film was very different from the argument supported by the editorial in the *St. Louis Argus* a couple of weeks later. The editorial condemned the “evil” and “insidious” nature of the film and the danger of showing it in St. Louis (“Keep Up the Protest” 1915). The African American community was so adamant about preventing the film’s screening that they presented their arguments to Mayor Keil and the city’s prosecuting attorney, who was working on an injunction to stop the screening. In response to the city’s legal action the filmmakers got a temporary injunction and opened the film on schedule. This film’s opening did not deter the city or the African American community from continuing to lobby against the film and the equable harm it would do to already tenuous race relations (“Keep Up the Protest” 1915).

Already busy working to defeat the segregation ordinances, attorneys Homer G. Phillips and George L. Vaughn took on the case of *The Birth of a Nation*. Their willingness to take on the case indicated their belief in the connection between the successful passing of the segregation ordinances or their defeat. If *The Birth of a Nation* was able to be shown without any backlash from the African American community, it validated its message of white supremacy and supported segregation of the races. Two weeks after opening, the film was allowed to continue

when the city's injunction was dissolved, but the restraining order against the police from interfering with the film's showing was continued and was heard the following week ("Court Dissolves One Injunction in Film Case" 1915).

Not everyone in the African American community supported the actions of the *St. Louis Argus* in publically condemning the film. The Negro Business League passed a resolution to condemn the film, just not publically. Many of the league's members were outraged with the resolution and believed the organization needed to take a public stand against the movie. The League's president, Mr. Gordon, after viewing the movie, said that he "had found nothing in it which the Negro ought to condemn, but that the reflection was on the white man" ("Business Men Refuse to Condemn Picture" 1915). It was the belief of the League that civic organizations should take up such matters, not a business organization. An editorial on the same day condemned the League and said that it was the responsibility of all African Americans to fight race prejudice that and the men of the League needed to learn "what they owe the race ("Why Not Protest" 1915).

By taking legal action to stop the showing of the film, Phillips and Vaughn attempted to shut down fictitious propaganda that would help the city win its battle for segregation. The Welfare League, a strong supporter of the segregation ordinances, used the film to distribute hundreds of brochures entitled "The Home Defender" to exiting patrons. Claiming the distribution was an act of the devil used to add fuel to the fire, an editorial in the *St. Louis Argus* called on the community to fight fire with fire. The editorial explained that now that they knew the type of tactics the supporters of the segregation ordinance would use to win their cause, the African American community needed to learn from them and do the same ("A Contributory Evil" 1915).

In the prairie fires, they fight fire WITH fire. Herein is a lesson for us. Let us study the plans and note the weapons of the enemy, and then fight them with their own weapons and along their own lines of campaign...O Negro citizens of America and of St. Louis in particular, awake! Too long have you been asleep. Arouse to a sense of your danger. Be everlasting on the watch. The devil and his cohorts never sleep. It is ETERNAL vigilance that is the price of liberty. ("A Contributory Evil" 1915)

Settled almost five weeks after the film's opening, the fight against the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* came to an end with the decision of Judge Hennings that the "play" was not objectionable because no serious conflicts occurred during its showing. Upset with the decision, an editor at the *St. Louis Argus* called it "shallow" and compared it to carrying a gun and speeding. Laws were made to prevent something serious from happening, not enacted after something had already happened. The editorial compared this rationale with "locking the stable door after the horse has been stolen" ("Judge Henning's Decision" 1915). In the case of *The Birth of a Nation* the damage had already been done by validating racist beliefs that would be voted into racist policies.

### **The Campaign for the Segregation Ordinances of 1916**

With a four-year head start over the African American community, the United Welfare Association mobilized White neighborhood organizations to begin their campaign supporting residential segregation. Many of the neighborhood groups supporting the United Welfare Association were also members of the Central Civic Council, who listed the segregation ordinances as one of the measures they planned to push with their membership. In addition to segregation they also planned to address trash pick-up, weed cutting, and the location of public

amusement parks, all things they believed were for the “betterment” of St. Louis (“Central Civic Council to Push 19 Movements” 1915).

The United Welfare Association took its argument to the media and explained that segregation was actually “American in the highest sense (“United Welfare Ass’n Explains Its Attitude on Question of Segregation” 1916). The association stated that Whites were upset that African Americans were leaving their neighborhoods to seek housing in new attractive White areas of town where the residents had worked hard to afford their homes by being “thrifty and frugal” (4). More than 1,000 cases of “Negro invasion” were reported, and it was spreading beyond downtown to other areas of the city. The association felt that by moving into White neighborhoods, African Americans caused harm by lowering property values and creating unsafe conditions for widows and children (“United Welfare Ass’n Explains Its Attitude on Question of Segregation” 1916).

Using Supreme Court decisions on social matters as its guide, the association believed it was well within its rights to seek a law requiring residential segregation. To support its claim of legal constitutionality of segregation, the association engaged St. Louis Law professor Sherman Steele to write an opinion on why the ordinance was within the bounds of the United States Constitution. Professor Steele started off with an argument on why the ordinance did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. As in earlier cases such as *Dred Scott* and *Roberts*, Steele claimed that the Fourteenth Amendment applied only to national citizenship and political rights and did not apply in this case because this was a social issue that should be decided at the local level, much like education. Steele also addressed the “separate but equal” doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* by saying that the same restriction was placed on both Whites and African Americans so no “badge of inferiority” was being placed on African Americans. He ended with

a reference to the Kentucky segregation case that was deemed valid, but was currently waiting for a decision by the United States Supreme Court. Steele implied the Kentucky law would stand because the Baltimore decision had upheld the city's right to legislate segregation even though it had been struck down on a technicality ("United Welfare Ass'n Explains Its Attitude on Question of Segregation" 1916; Steele 1916).

Framing segregation as a remedy that protected African Americans as much as Whites, the United Welfare Association believed keeping the races apart would prevent disturbances and aid in African American "betterment and uplift ("United Welfare Ass'n Explains Its Attitude on Question of Segregation" 1916). They continued to claim the ordinances were constructive for the entire community. They even went so far as to call the segregated schools a success that would be emulated with segregated housing. They also addressed their critics by saying the ordinances were not the work of the real estate community. This last statement was in direct contradiction to the founding of the Segregation Committee in 1912 at the annual meeting of the St. Louis Real Estate Exchange.

Not limiting their objections to residential housing only, the United Welfare Association protested the rumor of the new African American YMCA being constructed on Lindell Boulevard within close proximity to many White social clubs including the St. Louis Club and the Elks Club. Calling it in "bad taste" to seek a site in the most exclusive enclave of White society, the association president, Felix Lawrence, said he too had heard such rumors. Answering the rumors, Sumner principal and chair of the executive committee of the Negro YMCA, Frank Williams emphatically stated there were was no such plan to build on Lindell Boulevard and they intended to build in an African American neighborhood to "bring the YMCA

to the race instead of making them to go it” (“Negro Y.M.C.A Not to be Built on Lindell Blvd” 1916; “United Welfare Ass’n Explains Its Attitude on Question of Segregation” 1916).

The United Welfare Association was not alone in its battles to enforce residential segregation. White citizens wrote letters in support of the ordinances, claiming many of the hardships mentioned by the association such as loss of property value and even God’s law (“A Discouraged Home Owner” 1916; “The Lord’s Intentions” 1916). A widow on West Belle Place told a story of having to move twice in order to escape African Americans that had moved into her neighborhood and was at an age where she did not want to move again, but she must because her friends wouldn’t visit her. She ended her letter by stating that she was not alone and many of her friends would also never build another home in St. Louis (“A Discouraged Home Owner” 1916).

While the majority of supporters of the segregation ordinances were White, the ordinances did have some support from African Americans. A writer, William. Scott, to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* believed that segregation would make the African American community closer and would force them to depend upon each other and build their own resources. Scott continued by speculating that if they were segregated, they would have more political power because they could exchange their block voting power to demand better housing. Similar to the United Welfare Association, the writer said that the White community treated the African American community fairly in the educational arena, allowing them to advance, and that segregation would continue this advancement by teaching self-reliance. The letter concluded with Scott’s saying that segregation allowed African Americans to make their own way without having to pay tribute to anyone (“Scott 1915)

Unlike Wm. Scott, a majority of the African American community were preparing to fight the segregation ordinances on the ground and in the courts. While men like James Mitchell kept the ground war alive by constantly writing editorials encouraging action and race pride, other community leaders such as George Vaughn and Homer G. Phillips tried to beat the White community using their own weapon, the legal system. Though both strategies were unsuccessful in the end, the two-pronged approach illustrated the diverse strengths of the African American community and their ability to work together for the betterment of the race.

**The Campaign against the Segregation Ordinances: *Charles A. Pitman v. John W. Drabelle et al.***

Turning to the legal system to stop the segregation ordinances from moving forward, a group of ministers including George Stevens employed the services of a White lawyer to explore the issue and determine if a suit was advisable. This exploration of legal action was already being undertaken by the NAACP led by their legal team, George Vaughn and Homer G. Phillips. Instead of trying to work with the NAACP lawyers, the ministers thought it necessary to search out a White lawyer for an opinion. This struggle between the NAACP and the ministers came to a head with the ministers walking out of a meeting and convening their own meetings to discuss the issue (“Segregation Election May Be Illegal” 1915).

After two contentious meetings, the NAACP and the ministers created a subcommittee that would render a decision on the strategy moving forward. This committee requested that Vaughn and Phillips look into the validity of the ordinance and whether it could be defeated. They came back ten days later with the opinion that the initiative provisions of the state charter were included without proper authority and were therefore void. Because the charter provisions were void, the ordinances were void as well (“Segregation Election May Be Illegal” 1915).

In the spirit of compromise, the NAACP lawyers reached out to White lawyers who were willing to work with them on the case free of charge. The ministers did not accept this idea and insisted that their White lawyer be put in charge of the case at the cost of \$300 and suggested the NAACP lawyers receive compensation as well. Standing their ground, Vaughn and Phillips said they did not feel comfortable charging a fee to work on behalf of African American people (“Segregation Election May Be Illegal” 1915).

Sensing the division within the community over the legal fight against segregation, the *St. Louis Argus* pleaded for unity between the NAACP and the ministers. An editorial extolled the virtues of the NAACP, stating their history of fighting on behalf of the African American community, the great men they counted among their leadership, and their diverse membership that included Whites. The editorial reminded readers that the NAACP had started the committee against segregation and were working hard to defeat segregation, ending, with references to slavery and the way the master caused division among his slaves by teaching each one to be “apprehensive of his fellows; to mistrust them, to dislike them-this in order that they might not get together and plot to overturn the plantation (“A Plea For Unity in the Fight Against Segregation” 1915).

A month later, in January of 1916, lawyers Vaughn and Phillips stood before Judge Shields in St. Louis City Circuit Court on behalf of Charles A. Pitman, chairman of the NAACP executive committee. Arguing the validity of the ordinances’ charters, the NAACP lawyers asked for an injunction that would stop the election scheduled for the end of February. Moving into editorial prose, the article described Vaughn and Phillips as “brilliant” and “overwhelming” in their attacks against the ordinances. With a visual of law books covering the table, the lawyers cited numerous precedents and skillfully responded to questions from the court and the



city prosecutors. At the end of the trial the city was “ringing in praise of the association’s attorneys,” making Vaughn and Phillips the most talked about men in the city (“Segregation Case Heard by Judge Shields” 1916).

Upset with the delays in the ordinances, the United Welfare Association began circulating petitions for a recall of fourteen aldermen who did not allocate the funds for or set a date for the election. The new city charter that had just passed in 1914 required the Election Board to move forward with elections even without the appropriation from the alderman. The Election Board followed the charter and spent \$25,000 on registration. In addition to confirming an election date and allocating the funds, United Welfare Association president Lawrence implied there were other issues with the Alderman that he was not at liberty to discuss at the time (“Recall Election is to be Asked for 14 Alderman” 1916).

One week later Judge Shields found in favor of the defendants, and the segregation ordinances were found legal, so the election moved forward. Handing down a lengthy opinion, Judge Shields stated that the question before the court dealt with validity and constitutionality of legislation by the city under the initiative sections of the city charter. He said this reflected the plaintiff’s argument that the provisions in the initiatives provisions of the state charter were unconstitutional and therefore the ordinances should be deemed unconstitutional. The judge determined that argument to be unfounded and the courts would not interfere with the functions of city officials in exercising responsibilities related to political rights as opposed to property or civic rights (“Initiative Clause is Held Valid” 1916). This decision harkened back to Supreme Court decisions such as *Dred Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson* when the court decided that African Americans had no federal rights as citizens unless their political rights were in

danger of being violated. In this case, on the state level, the courts would not interfere with the political rights of individuals, as opposed to their property or social rights.

### **Whites' Support for the Segregation Ordinances**

With the court upholding the validity of the segregation ordinances, the African American community accelerated their push to defeat the law at the ballot box. Letters to the editor poured into the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and weekly editorials continued to appear in the *St. Louis Argus*. Some letters exposed the ordinances as the work of the St. Louis Realty Exchange as a way to drive up rents ("Segregation and Rents" 1916) while others questioned their Christianity ( Jones 1916). Support was garnered even as far away as Cape Girardeau, Missouri, in an editorial from the *Daily Tribune* ("Encouraging Race Prejudice" 1916).

The fight against the segregation ordinances was not limited to the African American community, but included prominent members of the White community as well. The NAACP met with the Citizen's Committee, a group made up of prominent Whites in the city to finalize campaign strategy. Meeting at the Pythian Temple, the group discussed the NAACP speaking in front of White audiences and the distribution of one hundred thousand circulars in White communities. The entire committee of Whites involved in the movement against the segregation ordinance is too vast to list, but included prominent names such as William H. Danforth, John W. Calhoun, Joseph Pulitzer, and Henry W. Elliott ("Anti-Segregation Notes" 1916).

The Jewish community showed their support of the defeat of the ordinances with an editorial in the *St. Louis Jewish Record*. Written by Washington University law school graduate David Barron, the editorial stressed the importance of the election to the Jewish community as "the everlasting persecuted and oppressed race." They were against the ordinances because they would restrain African Americans, who had the misfortune of being born with "black skins," and

these ordinances would further “blacken their lives here in St. Louis” (“No Segregation” 1916). Similar to Mitchell’s cries for political activism from the African American community, Barron called on the Jewish community to “rouse ourselves from this lethargic state” and vote against segregation. The editorial ended by asking the Jewish community to be “true Americans” and show the world that the St. Louis Jewish community condemned segregation as reactionary and unpatriotic (“No Segregation” 1916).

Though the African American community was working with Whites to defeat the segregation ordinances, they were not afraid to publicly call out Whites who provided financial support in favor of the ordinances. In a front page story under the large headline, “Contributors to Segregation Fund,” the *St. Louis Argus* provided a list of the men, their business affiliation and the amounts they gave to the fund (“Contributors to Segregation Fund” 1916). Prominent donors included D. D. Walker of Ely Walker Dry Goods Company for \$5,000, Rolla Wells, former mayor of St. Louis for \$150 and A. E. Dann of Simmons Hardware Co. for \$100. This list was just a fraction of the donors with many listed in a way to conceal their identity (“Contributors to Segregation Fund” 1916). Though the article did not specifically call for African Americans to boycott the White business owners who contributed to the segregation fund, the paper implied as much by listing their names and businesses on its front page.

With the Missouri State Supreme Court decision to deny the NAACP’s appeal and uphold the validity of the segregation ordinances, the fate of segregation in St. Louis was finally in the hands of the voters. The last segregation meeting was the day before the vote with all African American churches open for prayer and the provision of last minute instructions for Election Day (“The Last Mass Meeting on Segregation” 1916). Because of the wording of the ordinances, the *St. Louis Argus* ran a headline reminding voters that in order to vote no on

segregation they had to “scratch yes” (“No Segregation” 1916). These types of tactics to confuse voters exhibited the deceit utilized by the United Welfare Association and their supporters in their quest to disenfranchise the African American community.

### **The Passing of the Segregation Ordinances**

The strategy, organization, and passion of the African American community were not enough to prevent the segregation ordinances from passing with 52,000 in favor and only 17,000 against (“Segregation To Be Fought in Courts: Won By 34,000” 1916). With a banner headline of “Prejudice Wins Election,” the *St. Louis Argus* expressed the disappointment felt by the African American community (“Prejudice Wins Election” 1916). While the passing of the ordinances was a blow to the St. Louis community, segregation laws around the country received the ultimate test when the United States Supreme Court decided on the precedent-setting case in Louisville, Kentucky, a few months later. Until that decision was handed down, Judge Dyer in the United States District Courts for Missouri issued an injunction halting the implementation of the segregation ordinances in St. Louis (“Segregation Case Before Supreme Court” 1916; “City is Enjoined from Enforcing Segregation Ordinances” 1916).

Ultimately the United States Supreme Court struck down the segregation case in Louisville, Kentucky, and Judge Dyer in the United States District Court followed suit (“Judge D. P. Dyer Stops Segregation” 1916). Hailing this as a “great decision,” the *St. Louis Argus* editorial referenced back to earlier court decisions when it was declared that the law could not be used to bring about social equality. Social equality was to be obtained through the “mutual consent” of both races. African Americans were looking for equality in the law, not equality in the home, social clubs and fraternities (“Judge Dyer’s Great Decision” 1916).

The fight against residential segregation in St. Louis was over, but the environment that supported segregation was not. The segregation law had won at the polls, which illustrated the city's staunch support of separation of the races not only in housing, but in schools, churches, and social settings. This bittersweet victory set the backdrop for the work of the Central School Patrons Association and their battle with the St. Louis Board of Education to continue to improve educational opportunities for students.

### **Central School Patrons Association and the Segregation Law of 1916**

As the city tried to further regulate the African American community, the Central School Patrons Association worked to create equal opportunities for African American students. From grassroots efforts of organizing community meetings to formal presentations before the St. Louis Board of Education, the Central School Patrons Association used every method at their disposal to garner support for their case. In the end, the Central School Patrons Association accomplished their goal of a new school east of Grand Boulevard to alleviate overcrowding at Sumner High School.

This achievement was attained against a city landscape that less than ten years earlier had voted to segregate all social aspects of interaction including housing, schools, churches, and fraternal clubs. Because the men involved in the Central School Patrons Association were also instrumental in the fight against segregation, they had intimate knowledge of how to build support for their cause among diverse groups of people while not making requests for things outside of the acceptable legal and social bounds. Even though they had lost the segregation case, the valuable lessons they learned served them well as they continued to advocate for educational advancement.

When analyzing the actions of the Central School Patrons Association in relationship to the segregation ordinance of 1916, I drew the following conclusions. First because of their work on the segregation ordinance and the decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the group advocated for equality, not integration. Recognizing their legal right to equality if they were separate, the Central School Patrons Association used this law to their advantage when requesting improvements. Second, while the segregation ordinances were eventually found unconstitutional, they still garnered enough votes to pass, which confirmed the city's southern tendencies in regards to race relations. If anything good came out of the battle against segregation, it was the recognition that the city had a progressive stance in regards to the education of African Americans (Campbell 1905; Buckner 1922). In both letters and articles the schools were mentioned as an example of the city's enlightened view, which stood in stark contrast to the views on segregated housing.

The actions of the Central School Patrons Association have been examined not only in light of their connection to the segregation ordinances of 1916, but also in terms of certain tenets of critical race theory. When considered in the context of the permanence of racism, the critique of liberalism, and whiteness as property, the actions of the Central School Patrons Association reveal the role racial attitudes continue to play in the fight for African American equality.

### **Critical Race Theory and the Central School Patrons Association: The Permanence of Racism**

The passing of the segregation ordinances best exemplifies the racism that permeated St. Louis. Taking cues from their southern neighbors and as a response to the migrants that were moving North every day, the city sought to contain the mobility of its African American community. For all intents and purposes the city was segregated, but the segregation ordinances turned this discriminatory practice into a law punishable with monetary fines for anyone in

violation. While the emphasis of the ordinances was housing, schools were also subject to this law. This meant that schools could only be built in areas of the city that already housed that specific race. This solved the problem of the school board's putting African American schools in neighborhoods in opposition to the White community. If the law was upheld, it also meant that African Americans would live in the least desirable neighborhoods characterized by city neglect and would also attend schools in these man-made ghettos.

From the beginning, the supporters of the segregation ordinances sought to strengthen the city's harmful racial environment by playing on Whites' fears and racist beliefs and attitudes towards African Americans. This strategy of planting racial fears and reinforcing once and for all the permanence of racism was achieved by way of Hollywood and the showing of *The Birth of a Nation*. Because the movie was shown in the city at the start of the segregation battle, its supporters did not have to voice the evils that would occur if the races were mixed; the film did it for them with every ticket that was purchased. In case moviegoers did not see the film as a look into the city's future if they did not pass the segregation ordinances, the United Welfare League distributed fliers after the movie helping them make the connection between the violence on the screen and its potential to invade their neighborhoods.

The ministers struggling against the segregation ordinances were aware of the white supremacy foundation upon which they fought and tried to use racism to their advantage. In an effort to prevent the segregation ordinances from even reaching the people for a vote, a group of African American ministers engaged a White lawyer to sue on their behalf. And thinking about how to use the legal system to stop the ordinances from moving forward, the NAACP also planned to bring a suit against the ordinances using African American lawyers. The battle over the lawyers became such an issue that the *St. Louis Argus* published an editorial asking for peace

between the two groups and saying that the paper would no longer run stories regarding the conflict (“Let Us Have Peace” 1915).

Recognizing that they were fighting not only for their race, but ultimately about racial discrimination, the ministers decided to hire a White lawyer, which made sense. If they had any chance at stopping the segregation law from moving forward, they had to retain a lawyer whose opinion would be not only respected, but considered truthful without prejudice. Because of racism and the belief that African Americans were inferior, it was more difficult for an African American lawyer to win the favor of the court. A White lawyer was able to appeal to his fellow White judge and plead the case on their behalf.

In the end the case was tried by NAACP attorneys George Vaughn and Homer G. Phillips, who were praised for their legal abilities to the point of “overwhelming” their opponents (“Segregation Case Heard by Judge Shields” 1916). This acclaim did not render a verdict in their favor, and the segregation ordinance was put before the voters the following month. While it was impossible to determine if a White lawyer would have received a favorable verdict, it was possible to demonstrate the permanence of racism that continued to infiltrate the city and to impact the actions and the outcomes of the Central School Patrons Association.

In their fight for educational equity, the Central School Patrons Association sought White allies through the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Considered a champion for justice, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was praised by the *St. Louis Argus* for “defending the right and exposing the wrong (“The One Big Newspaper” 1916). Through letters to the editors and news stories, the Central School Patrons Association got their message to the White community and appealed to their sense of fairness. This strategy of interracial support was important because the housing ordinance would not be defeated purely on the votes of African Americans.



The passing of the segregation ordinances at the ballot box clearly indicated how strong a role race played in the city. A city teetering on the social edge of the South and political edge of the North, St. Louis showed its true leanings by legalizing segregation. Though they fought on different sides of the war, St. Louis and its confederate opponents were more alike than either was willing to admit. At the end of the day, regardless of their geography, African Americans were living within societal and institutional structures that were built and sustained by the permanence of racism.

### **Critical Race Theory and the Central School Patrons Association: Critique of Liberalism**

The Central School Patrons Association experienced the futility of the court system to secure equitable rights for African Americans in the defeat of the injunctions to stop the showing of *The Birth of a Nation* and the segregation ordinances. In both of these situations, the African American community asked the courts to step in and protect their rights and were denied each time. This denial was a clear message to the community that they could not depend upon the courts to secure their rights and instead they had to find other avenues for progress.

The lack of legal action on the part of the Central School Patrons Association did not mean they were ignorant of their rights under the state constitution and the federal law established by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. With lawyers such as Vaughn and Phillips in the association, the group possessed some of the best legal minds in the community working on their behalf. This knowledge of the legal system was apparent in many of the arguments made on behalf of school improvements because they all harkened back to the principle of “separate but equal.”

The Central School Patrons Association never brought legal action against the St. Louis Board of Education, but it loomed over the battle like a constant threat that could be exercised at any time. From the initial resolutions sent to the board (“Resolutions Sent to the School Bo’rd”

1922) to the final appeal by the ministers before the announcement of the new high school east of Grand Boulevard (“The Ministers Appeal to School Board” 1925), the African American community was poised and ready to implement legal action if absolutely necessary. The final appeal by the ministers was more than a veiled threat and drew the final line in the sand by stating “if the Board fails to do its plain duty towards Colored children, of course, the courts are open and relief may be sought through the courts” (“The Ministers Appeal to the School Board” 1925).

The lack of confidence of the Central School Patrons Association in the local court’s ability to protect their rights was confirmed with the passing of the segregation ordinances and their reliance on the Supreme Court for defeat of the ordinances. While the ordinances were being appealed by the NAACP, Judge Dyer of the U.S. District Court, using the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in a similar segregation case in Louisville, Kentucky, as precedent, struck down the segregation ordinances. While not speaking to the social ills of segregation, Judge Dyer avowed that “no State shall enact or enforce a law abridging the immunities and privileges of citizens of the United States” (“Judge Dyer’s Great Decision” 1916).

The *St. Louis Argus* reiterated what African Americans had known since the *Roberts v. City of Boston* decision in 1849. African Americans would never get social equality through the legal system (Ficker 1999; “Judge Dyer’s Great Decision” 1916). Time and time again this fact was proven in case after case brought before local, state, and federal courts by African Americans trying to use the legal system to control societal behavior. Instead of depending upon a system that was designed to protect political rights and not social rights such as education, the Central School Patrons Association developed a strategy of advocacy that relied on grassroots

organizing, persistence of message, and knowledge of the law to win educational equity for African American children in St. Louis.

### **Critical Race Theory and the Central School Patrons Association: Whiteness as Property**

Conceived by the St. Louis Realty Exchange, the segregation ordinances were another way for Whites to increase their access to property rights while denying those same rights to African Americans. Claiming the ordinances had nothing to do with real estate, the United Welfare Association lobbied on behalf of the ordinances through repeated claims of the constitutionality of segregated housing (“Segregation Bill is No Hardship, Realty Men Claim” 1912; “United Welfare Ass’n Explains its Attitude on Question of Segregation” 1916). The United Welfare Association was not officially a committee of the St. Louis Real Estate Exchange, but it was composed of representatives from more than a dozen ward organizations (“Special Election to Segregate City Negroes Planned” 1913). This type of representation from ward organizations made it difficult to believe that the goals of the ordinances were not related to White’s accumulation of wealth in the form of real estate.

The concept of whiteness as property meant that whiteness became a resource that granted certain benefits to those who possessed it and penalized those who did not. In the case of the segregation ordinance the idea of property was literal as Whites tried to legally establish their rights to retain housing in the most desirable areas of town while at the same time driving up rents in the areas designed for African Americans (“Segregation and Rents” 1916). The segregation ordinances were designed to maintain White wealth by allowing Whites to acquire property and pass it down to their children, thereby creating a system of generational wealth. African Americans would not have the same opportunity to create wealth because their property

would be located in areas of disrepair and neglect that created ghettos with poor sanitation and declining city services (“Segregation and Its Evils” 1915).

Because of their involvement in lobbying against the segregation ordinances, the Central School Patrons Association was well aware of the city’s desire to segregate not only housing but school buildings as well. Armed with this knowledge, the association was careful when requesting a new high school due to crowded conditions at the one high school for African American students. From the beginning they were very specific with their request for a new high school located East of Grand Blvd. This location was determined because of the large number of students attending Sumner High School who were currently traveling from this area of town. Unlike the battle that arose over the location of the new Sumner High School, there was little push back from the White community with the proposed location of this second high school. This lack of conflict didn’t mean the Central School Patrons Association had an easier time securing a school than their predecessors, the Colored Citizens’ Council. It just meant that they understood the city’s racial landscape and formed a proposal that would complement, not counter the city’s tolerance for segregation.

## **Conclusion**

The passing of the segregation ordinances continued the intentional desire to deny African Americans the rights afforded to them as citizens of the United States. From the decisions in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, African Americans quickly learned that in order to progress beyond the plantations, they had to advocate for a place in the new American order that deemed them neither property nor citizens. Seizing upon the power of education to uplift and transform, the Central School Patrons Association continued the tradition started by the men of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools and fought for

their children's education. The battle was not fair and there were many roadblocks placed in their way, but the Central School Patrons Association fought for one thing they could secure in a society of legally sanctioned segregation, educational equity.

## **Chapter 6: Cultural Capital**

As African Americans joined together to advocate for their educational rights they ran into roadblocks built on the racism that permeated society both before and after the Civil War. As mentioned previously, these roadblocks ranged from lack of African American teachers to inadequate funding to decrepit facilities (Anderson 1988; Walker 1996; Williams 2005). Even though African Americans were legally free, they were still forced to fight for their right to an education. The African American citizens' councils in St. Louis fought not only for an education that was equal to that of Whites, but for an education that reflected the unique culture they brought to the classroom.

On the surface, the demands made by the citizens' councils reflected their desire for a quality education. But a deeper study of their requests also reveals that they wanted an education that recognized the value of African American culture. The citizens' councils realized they could not be transparent about promoting and transferring African American culture because the White school boards would not support such requests. Instead requests for resources were framed in a way that allowed Whites to feel safe in their decisions to provide schools, teachers, and equipment to a race they believed was culturally inferior to their own (Gersman 1972).

In order to explore the idea of cultural inferiority or cultural capital, I will briefly review the arguments that both support and deny the existence of an African American culture. Following this argument is the definition of cultural capital and two examples from scholars who utilize cultural capital in analyzing African American education. The first example by education professor Jerome E. Morris (2009) examines contemporary schooling and attributes cultural capital to the success of a neighborhood school. The second example by educational historian

Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) takes a historical look at African American educational success and also attributes it to an environment that promoted the cultural capital of the community. The final section of the chapter takes the types of cultural capital described by Tara J. Yosso (2005) and applies them to the work of the citizens' councils to illustrate how they openly pushed for academic achievement while quietly advancing cultural capital.

### **Fraizer/Herskovits Debate**

The debate concerning the existence of African American culture goes back to the arguments between anthropologists Melville Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier (Raboteau 1978). Similar to white supremacy found in CRT, Frazier believed that African culture was unable to survive the middle passage and the conditions of slavery. After arriving in the New World the slaves became empty vessels for the European's cultures and traditions. The Africans did not carry with them the ways of their homelands, and any similarities to traditions in their homeland were not significant (Raboteau 1978).

Herskovits immediately refuted this argument because "the culture of West Africa was neither savage nor low and was not automatically overwhelmed by contact with supposedly superior European cultures" (Raboteau 1978, 51). Herskovits refuted the myth of a lack of culture in African Americans by saying that Africans contributed just as much to the American culture as "Swedes, Germans, or Irish" immigrants (52). While the language may have changed, this debate continues today in the form of cultural capital and its place in society (Delpit 1992 Morris 2009; Solorzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso 2005).

### **Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital is defined as "the accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society" (Yosso 2005, 76). In the case of free

and newly freed African Americans living in post-Civil War society, they were thought to be culturally deficient because they did not have a culture that was thought to be of value. Moving this definition even closer to African American citizens' councils, Franklin (2002) connected cultural capital to "a sense of group consciousness and identity" that was designed to uplift the entire group. Though I am looking specifically at cultural capital in relation to the funding of African American schools, this definition better describes the work of the men of the citizens' councils because it reflects the idea of shared agency for a common purpose.

There were two ways that cultural capital could be acquired, through the family or through formal schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Historically, society believed that African Americans were deficient in culture, so it stood to reason that the only place Whites believed they could obtain this cultural capital was in formal schooling (Cohen 2010; Freedman 1999; Lipsitz 2011; Taylor 2005). This attitude was evident in the AMA's belief that only through formal schooling would African Americans have a chance of making positive contributions to society. In order to accomplish this task, the AMA established schools led by Northern White teachers and superintendents who denied the abilities of African Americans to run their own schools. Without the agency of men such as M. Morrison Clark, the AMA would have continued their supremacist structure by continuing to value White leadership over African American culture.

Instead of using the dominant culture's definition of cultural capital to analyze African American citizens' councils between 1875 and 1927, I believe Yosso's (2005) forms of capital better capture the agency and spirit of the African American community during this time period. Looking beyond the White mainstream to set behavioral norms, Yosso found the strengths in



communities of color to turn cultural deficits into six distinct types of capital. These types of capital were aspirational, familial, social, resistance, navigational, and linguistic (Yosso 2005).

While Yosso focused on Chicano communities, African American scholars such as Morris (2009) and Walker (1996) utilized many of the same types of cultural capital when describing why African American schools were successful. Morris's research focused on modern day schools while Walker took a historical lens to cultural capital. In both cases they discovered that student success was achieved through the support of the community and the valuing of African American culture. Through this redefining of cultural capital stemming from critical race theory, I have also moved the narrative of the African American citizens' councils and their involvement in education from a model based on the beliefs of the dominant White culture to a model based on the needs of the African American community.

### **Contemporary Cultural Capital**

In his book *Troubling the Waters: Fulfilling the Promise of Quality Public Schooling for Black Children* (2009), Morris examines schools in St. Louis, Missouri, and Atlanta, Georgia, that were successful in educating low income African American students while other schools failed. What he discovered through his research was that both contemporary and historically, schools that achieved success had strong bonds with the community. In other words they were "communally bonded" (Morris 2009, 4) schools that exhibited many of the forms of cultural capital uncovered by Yosso (2005).

Communally bonded schools were schools that created and maintained close relationships with the communities they served. In the case of Morris's research, these communities were African American. The characteristics of such schools included culturally affirming relationships between teachers and students, outreach to families and students, serving

as foundational institutions in the community, and having a principal that bridged the relationship between the school and the community (Morris 2004 Morris 2009). These characteristics worked in harmony to create a school environment that recognized the student's culture and saw it as an asset to be nurtured instead of a deficit to be dismissed.

The school in Morris's research that not only recognized but affirmed the culture the students brought into the classroom each day was Fairmont Elementary. Located in St. Louis City, Fairmont Elementary was a White school until desegregation in 1956. White flight occurred as a result of desegregation, and the school was primarily African American within a few years. This shift in population occurred throughout the north side of the city, and many of the schools that were desegregated by law became re-segregated by choice (Morris 2009).

Unlike Springhill, the St. Louis county school studied by Morris with no mention of African American culture (even during Black History Month), Fairmont students were surrounded by their culture. They had teachers who wore traditional African dress, experienced cultural and historical celebrations, and enjoyed displays in the hallways showcasing famous African Americans. The teachers sustained the culture in the classroom by finding ways to connect the students' knowledge to the curriculum. These connections allowed the students to feel that the knowledge they brought to the classroom was valued and in turn, so were they.

### **Historical Cultural Capital**

*Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* by Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) focuses on the Caswell County Training School from the 1930's up to its closing in 1969. Her research uncovered the story of a poor African American community in the South who worked together to provide their children with an education. From the parents helping to raise money to build the school to the teachers who

worked until the job was done to the principal who provided the vision, the school was a success because it believed that in order to uplift the race, everyone had to work together.

The story of Caswell County Training School's success was a direct reflection of the importance of cultural wealth when working with African American communities. Throughout the historical narrative of the school, there was evidence from teachers, parents, and school leadership of the utilization of culture to push the students to achieve and succeed to their highest potential. Because the narrative was rich with instances of cultural capital, below are examples of aspirational, familial, and resistance capital used by the school to create an environment of success.

Schools that exhibited aspirational capital believed that all students had a future and it was the school's responsibility to help them reach this future. In the words of Caswell County Training School, it was their job to help students reach their "highest potential" (Walker 1996, 158). This potential would be met in spite of barriers such as race, class, and poverty. These barriers were not used as excuses for achievement, but instead became roadblocks that students successfully overcame. School administrators were not the only ones with this aspirational capital. It was also present in the parents who worked tirelessly first to get a school built for their children and then to support the school long after their children graduated. Aspirational capital was a collaborative concept that allowed the community to look beyond the here and now and hope for a brighter future.

"He [Mr. Dillard] loved us and treated us like his own children. We felt like we were at home" (Walker 1996, 134). The Caswell County Training school staff served as second families for their students. This familial atmosphere reflected the teachers' experiences in both their schooling and their college. This type of cultural reproduction could not be taught because it

was learned through experience. The students recognized the familial relationships and responded to them positively because they wanted to please their teachers (Walker 1996).

Not leaving the school culture to chance, Mr. Dillard also structurally designed the school schedule so it replicated a family atmosphere. This was done through the creation of four home room teachers that followed students throughout their high school career. These homeroom classes worked on activities and projects associated with the specific school year culminating with the senior yearbook and graduation. The homeroom teacher structure was successful as remembered by student Judy Mitchell from 1954: “It was like that group of teachers had a lot of concern and care and looked out after us for those four years. And it became like a family. They were like family to us” (Walker 1996, 125).

“There may be a time when you have to compete against [white people]. You don’t want your work to be equal. You want your work to be better. Show that you can do better” (Walker 1996, 152). Caswell County staff taught their students to resist through the very act of giving them a well-rounded education. The resistance was seen in the teacher’s quote above. Because of their race and class, society wrote off the students in Caswell County. The teachers worked hard every day to change this societal message of low expectations and present their students with a counter message of achievement (Walker 1996).

The school, specifically Mr. Dillard, also taught the community how to resist the status quo and fight for their rights. He did this by working with the parents to prepare them to make presentations and reports to the school board and the state board on behalf of their children’s education. While the parents may not have resisted in traditional ways such as sitting in at lunch counters or taking freedom rides, they were fighting against the White power structure to force them to provide their children with a future (Walker 1996).

This resistance exhibited by the community of Caswell County reflects the actions of the African American citizens' councils in St. Louis. Through the use of strong African American teachers and principals, rigorous curriculums, and community advocacy, both communities pushed their educational agenda forward despite the obstacles of race and class. Even though they were in different parts of the country at different periods in time, they both found ways to create culturally relevant learning opportunities within a school system designed by and for Whites.

### **Cultural Capital in African American Citizens' Councils**

As mentioned in the introduction, in St. Louis African American citizens' councils advocated for educational equity for African American students. This advocacy took the form of groups of men coming together for a shared purpose. Using the collective agency model, the citizens' councils worked from a position of strength that they would not have had as individuals (Franklin 2002). An example of this strength was the request to relocate Sumner High School. Before the citizen's council made their request in 1907, there was a brief mention in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in 1896 from a gentleman making a very similar request ("To Move a School" 1896). Because this request was not part of a collective movement, it received little response.

Through the power of their collective agency the African American citizens' councils achieved not only academic advancements for students, but also cultural advancements. Though not expressed in the same language used by Yosso (2005), Morris (2009), and Walker (1996), the idea of cultural capital was the hidden foundation of many of the requests of the councils. From the insistence on African American teachers and principals to school locations to school curriculums, the citizens' councils did not openly make a case for the recognition and transference of their culture to the next generation. Instead, they found ways to preserve their

community's cultural capital once students were inside their segregated buildings away from the prying eyes of the White community.

### **Aspirational Capital**

Starting even before the creation of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, the African American communities in St. Louis exhibited aspirational capital (Gersman 1972; Primm 1998; Troen 1975). This type of capital allowed the communities to believe that all of their children, both free and enslaved, had a future and that it was the community's responsibility to help them reach this future. This definition is slightly altered from Yosso's (2005) to shift the aspiration from the school community to the entire community. This distinction was important because of the time period of the African American citizens' councils and patterns of residential segregation. Between the years of 1865 and 1927, African Americans in St. Louis lived in segregated neighborhoods and built what Heathcott (2005) would later call "archipelagos," small African American communities surrounded by whiteness.

Aspirational capital was the foundation of the creation of the African American citizens' councils. Because of their strong belief in education as the path to freedom and a better future, African Americans were willing to risk their lives to learn to read and write (Anderson 1988; Williams 2005). This desire for an education continued once they obtained their freedom and were able to legally begin participating in the educational system. Once in the system, a system run by Whites, African Americans realized they would have to join together to advocate for an education that served their needs and not the needs of their benefactors.

The idea of fighting for the right to control their educational destiny was at the core of the creation of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools. The AMA came in and set up schools in St. Louis for the free population, but they insisted on participating in how the

schools were run. The AMA tried to sidestep the issue by selecting the African American men who would participate in the newly formed board, and this was quickly shut down at a very hostile community meeting (Candee 1864a). Again, the African American community refused to allow the AMA to select their leadership and fought with them until they secured the opportunity to decide who would lead the educational efforts for their children.

This aspirational capital continued with the community's coming together through the Colored Citizens' Council to advocate for improvements for Sumner High School. At this point in history, African Americans lost what little power they had enjoyed during the brief years of Reconstruction and were now subjected to the restrictive laws that legalized racially segregated schools. Instead of fighting to integrate the schools, the citizens' council fought to achieve the "separate but equal" status that now defined their reality (Colored Citizens 1907; Reese and Rury 2008).

The African American community in St. Louis believed in the future of their community and knew that this future would occur only if their children received an education that was rich both academically and culturally. This tireless belief in a better future pushed the citizens' councils to make demands that would reach beyond short-term change to systematic change that produced an educated and informed African American community.

### **Familial Capital**

The idea of transference of cultural knowledge through the system of kinship networks was at the heart of the fight for African American teachers and principals. From the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools to the Central School Patrons Association, they all insisted on the hiring of African American teachers for their schools. This dogged insistence on African American teachers and principals served the community's need to instill a sense of racial

pride through the dissemination of African American culture and history as well as to build up strong community institutions.

The Constitution of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools explicitly stated the board's power to "appoint agents, collect and disburse funds, secure school grounds and rooms for schools, appoint school superintendents and teachers (St. Louis Board 1864). The importance of these powers was evident in that they were spelled out in the second article of the Constitution directly following the preamble. The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools insisted early in their tenure on the need to hire African American teachers as well as a superintendent. They did not get an African American superintendent, but they did receive an African American teacher from Oberlin, Mr. George Booth, who was later joined by an assistant, Miss Patterson, and a teacher, Mr. Green Wilkerson, both from Oberlin College. The conditions of the schools were not ideal with overcrowded classrooms, poor facilities, and lack of supplies (Wilkerson 1865a; Booth 1864; Richardson 1975) and the newly arrived African American teachers voiced their concerns and complaints to the AMA national offices in New York.

The importance of African American teachers to the community was expressed by the White superintendent, George Candee, to his supervisor in New York. In one of his regular update letters, he stated that the two priorities of the newly formed board were to "furnish first class schools for the children" and to "furnish colored teacher employment in the schools. One is as important as the other. Both tend to elevate the race" (Candee 1864e). Candee continued by saying that White teachers were "not as acceptable to the colored people" so it was in the best interest of the AMA to find "first-rate" colored teachers as soon as possible.

Candee tried to fight the African American community on their desire for African American teachers. In a letter dated June 9 1864, Candee sounded angry at the community's



refusal to consider White teachers while accepting less-qualified teachers “of their own color.” Candee identified the insistence on African American teachers as a “great obstacle with which we have had to contend ever since we came here.” Candee saw the request for African American teachers as the board’s attempt to secure employment for African Americans instead of a way of creating and sustaining cultural kinship in the schools.

The correspondence between the African American board president M. Morrison Clark and the AMA repeatedly made reference to the hiring of African American teachers. The references include requests for teachers as well as financial obligations for the teachers. Nowhere in the letters does Clark explain why the community was insistent on African American teachers. As mentioned above, Candee believed the requests were purely for economic reasons, but this reason did not take into account the desire for the African American community to use its culture to create a successful classroom environment.

Through the insistence on hiring African American teachers, the community introduced familial or kinship ties into the school environment. African American teachers shared a cultural background with their students and their students’ families that allowed them to create familial learning spaces in their classrooms that built upon their shared knowledge (Yosso 2005; Ladson-Billings 1998; Morris 2009). The bonds that were created by the racial similarities of the teachers and the students created an environment where the students’ culture was seen to have value and considered a strength instead of a deficit to be overcome (Williams 1920; Williams 2005; White 2002).

The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools started hiring African American teachers, and the St. Louis Public Schools continued this trend when they began absorbing and creating African American schools that were funded through tax dollars. It was

difficult to pinpoint the first African American teachers hired by the St. Louis Public Schools since they absorbed African American schools, such as the AMA, that already had African American teachers. In some narratives of African American education in Missouri (Kremer 1991), James Milton Turner was thought to be the first African American teacher of a school supported by state taxes. Turner, an educational advocate, was hired to teach in Kansas City in 1866. Dismayed with what he encountered, Turner began advocating for a Normal School for African Americans in order to adequately train them to become teachers. Turner approached Lincoln Institute, a school founded by African American soldiers from Missouri who had fought in the Civil War. Though he worked diligently with Lincoln Institute to help train African Americans, Turner followed the pattern of the AMA and preferred to hire White teachers for African American schools because he felt they would transfer the values of White Christianity to the culturally inferior African Americans (Kremer 1991; Moore 1971).

The hiring of African American teachers and principals created a familial culture and kinship within the schools that allowed students to not only survive but thrive. The teachers built upon the knowledge brought into the classroom while reinforcing the importance of African American culture and its role within society. Instead of trying to assimilate the students into the normative white culture, the African American teachers used the familial culture of the classroom to create social capital opportunities for the students and the community.

### **Social Capital**

The *Complaint* of the Colored Citizens' Council in 1907 spoke directly to the environment and the culture needed in order for African American students to receive an education equal to that of their White peers. The issues addressed in regard to academics included academic course offerings, defective language skills in students, and teacher quality.

Realizing the role the school played in the cultural enrichment of the students (and the community), the council also specifically listed the “auxiliary cultural features” the building lacked. This list was preceded by this statement of importance:

There are always in well managed High and Normal Schools certain features tributary to the course which helps to clinch and expand the work of the classroom, and to make the student larger than his text book, giving him ease and confidence in using his learning (Colored Citizens 1907).

This list of suggested features included a lyceum (theater), a music program (choral, glee, and orchestra), library, gymnasium, assembly room. All of these cultural enhancements would be utilized by the students and their families, thereby serving as a community space within the neighborhood that supported social capital.

Social capital in the school environment was the networking of people and community resources (Yosso 2005; Morris 2009). In the case of Sumner High School, the social capital was not only the relocation of the school, but the vibrant Elleardsville (“the Ville”) community that grew up around it (Dowden-White 2011; Gordon 2008; Lang 2009). When advocating for the relocation of the school, the Colored Citizens’ Council specifically selected the neighborhood because of the future shift of the African American population. Not only using their word for it, the council backed up their prediction with information on overcrowding at nearby Simmons School (Colored Citizens 1907). As shown by the leadership of Mr. Dillard in Caswell County, the location and neighborhood alone were not enough to create social capital. In order for it to truly occur, there had to be a school leader who understood the importance of social capital to the health and prosperity of the community. In 1911 with the opening of the new Sumner High School, Frank Williams became that school leader.

## **Frank Williams**

When they approved the construction of the new Sumner High School in 1908, the St. Louis Board of Education also appointed a new principal, Frank L. Williams. Mr. Williams hailed from Kentucky, serving as a principal in both the high school and the Normal School in Louisville. He later moved on to Covington, Kentucky, to become principal of William Grant High School and to take graduate level classes at the University of Cincinnati. In addition to his work at the school, he also served as the president of the State Association of Kentucky Colored Teachers for eight years and was a recognized community leader (Down Memory Lane 1959). The Superintendent's report of 1908 even went so far as to say "the Board was fortunate in securing the services of a man so fitted to carry forward the great work planned and inaugurated for the rational education of the young people of his race in this community (St. Louis Public Schools 1909). The leadership and vision of Frank Williams set Sumner High School on a path of success continued throughout his ten-year tenure as principal.

Upon the opening of the new high school building the Board of Education reported "a new mode of life with varied interests and activities." They continued by saying that the improvements made to the facilities and curriculum resulted in "improved scholarship, awakened ambitions, increased self-respect, and intense loyalty to the school (St. Louis Public Schools 1912, 88). They quantified these statements by referring to the increase in enrollment from 447 in 1909 to 549 in 1910 and saw this as an "awakened" interest in education on the part of African Americans. I would argue that based on *A Complaint with Illustrations to the Board of Education of St. Louis* received three years earlier, African Americans were already concerned about education and that the increase in enrollment was due to the fact that they now had a quality school that prepared them to succeed in life.

From the beginning of his tenure at Sumner High School, Williams made a significant difference in the quality of education for African American students in St. Louis. As if he was following the 1907 *Complaint* presented to the St. Louis Board of Education, Williams addressed almost all of the deficiencies mentioned. From the improvement of the curriculum, to a more professional Normal School, to a wide range of cultural activities to engage the students and the community, Sumner High School was on its way to creating a legacy of educational excellence.

This journey started on the national level with the school's acceptance into the North Central Association of High Schools and Colleges. It continued onto the state level with the state granting Normal School students teaching certifications. And finally the journey ended on the local level with the board's granting Williams the same salary as his White counterparts. When doing so, the St. Louis Board of Education stated, "His work was as significant in the life of the schools as that of any of the other principals (St. Louis Public Schools 1915, 152).

Williams did not just improve the quality of life inside of the school building, but reached out into the neighborhood to improve the lives of his students and their families. Through his understanding of the importance of social capital, Williams worked with organizations to create a community rich in resources necessary to sustain and grow the next generation. Before moving to St. Louis, Williams had been involved in various professional and civic organizations in his home state of Kentucky. In St. Louis, Williams continued this service to the community by founding and serving as the president of the New Age Building and Loan Association, serving as curator at Lincoln University, and helping to secure a bond for the building of Homer G. Phillips Hospital. During his time at Sumner High School, Mr. Williams was a member of the YMCA Board of Directors and served as the chair of one of the most successful campaigns for the construction of a new African American YMCA in the country (Down Memory Lane 1959).

Mr. Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears, Roebuck & Company, issued a challenge grant of \$25,000 to cities that could raise \$75,000 to build and equip a YMCA for “colored men and boys.” This was the same Rosenwald who funded schools for African American students throughout the South (Anderson 1988; Williams 2005). In 1915, St. Louis became the thirteenth city to receive such a challenge. On its editorial page, the *St. Louis Argus* praised Mr. Rosenwald, “the Jew of Chicago,” “for seeing the diamond in rough of the colored men.” The editors went on to say what a wonderful gift this was to the St. Louis community and what good it would do. Finally, the editors encouraged everyone to help themselves because “no man should do more for you than you are willing to do for yourselves” (“That Rosenwald Gift” 1915).

Frank Williams was an active member of the Board of Directors of the YMCA, and because of his leadership skills and community involvement he was the natural choice to chair its capital campaign. In the first ten days of the campaign the St. Louis Community raised almost \$70,000. This was \$5,000 away from their goal of \$75,000. The speed with which Williams raised this large gift smashed any previous records for philanthropy in any African American community across the nation (“Records Smashed in Y.M.C.A Work” 1915; “Negroes to Raise Third of \$150,000 for Y.M.C.A Home” 1915).

As with most capital campaigns, gifts were made as pledges or subscriptions as they were called during this time. This meant that donors were not required to pay the full amount at one time, but could do so over time. This allowed for larger donations to be made and the goal to be reached sooner. In addition to allowing for subscriptions, the campaign was divided into twenty teams with each team headed by men in the community. Some of the men who headed teams

worked with Williams at Sumner High School including his assistant principal, Mr. J. W. Myers (“Records Smashed in Y.M.C.A Work” 1915).

The largest gift of the campaign came from Professor and Mrs. Annie Malone, founders of Poro College. Their gift of \$5,000 was described by the *St. Louis Argus* as being the largest for a “member of our race” in the world. With this gift, the Malones “laid well a foundation that shall be builded (sic) in the hearts of men and women in this city” (“A Big Gift” 1915). Gifts of such magnitude were rare during campaigns, and most of the money pledged was in smaller amounts. The YMCA worked to keep up the enthusiasm around the campaign by bringing in speakers and listing the names of the individuals who pledged \$100 or more in the paper. Campaign Chairman Williams pledged the second highest gift of \$1,000 to the fund. This gift represented one third of his salary at the time (“Y.M.C.A. Keeps Enthusias Up” 1916).

Instead of stopping the campaign once the \$75,000 was raised, Frank Williams and his team created a stretch goal of \$150,000 and continued raising money. As part of this new goal, each team committed to raising \$10,000. At the meeting to announce the total amount of money raised, the teams were \$51 short. Williams, along with one of his team captains, immediately stepped in and made up the difference (“\$10,000 Mark Reached in Y.M.C.A. Fund” 1916). It was this type of leadership that led to community organizations congratulating Williams on his success by writing letters to the editor and making their own pledges of support (“Congratulations” 1916).

Williams’s involvement in the YMCA was an extension of the work he did at Sumner High School on a daily basis. When Williams became principal, he worked to improve not only the academic culture of the school, but the school climate as well. He encouraged the staff and students to form student organizations and explored new cultural and volunteer activities. This

change in school culture was recognized by the board when they remarked, “The formation of student organizations, musical, dramatic, literary, and athletic, are evidences of the increased vitality and of the voluntary activity of various forms in which the pupils are seriously engaged (St. Louis Public Schools 1912).

Through his work at Sumner High School and in the community, Frank Williams created the type of social capital that was necessary for African American schools and communities to thrive. Williams made connections to community organizations such as the YMCA and Poro College as well as to local churches such as Central Baptist Church. These connections helped to enrich the lives of the students and build a thriving African American community around the school. This type of community was what the Colored Citizens Council envisioned when they made their request to the board. While the school board thought they were giving African Americans only a building, the Colored citizens group knew that Sumner had the potential to be so much more. It was more than a building. It was the foundation of the social capital that gave the community the strength to fight against the system and exhibit the resistance capital that would help in their fight for equality.

### **Resistance Capital**

Resistance capital is the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (McKenzie 2009; Morris 2004; Taylor 2005; Yosso 2005). This was evident in the formation of the African American citizens’ councils. The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools persisted in their requests for African American teachers even as their White superintendent worked against them. The Colored Citizens’ Council and later the Central School Patrons Association fought the White school board for facilities, teacher training, and curriculums. In all three of the cases, the African American citizens’ councils



resisted the white supremacy structure of education that tried to maintain the status quo to create a system that worked for their benefit instead of their demise.

The importance of African American teachers to the dissemination of culture provided a link to all three of the citizens' councils. Even though they spanned over sixty years, the councils all understood the importance of having African American teachers in the classrooms teaching African American students. In addition to the familial and social capital they provided to students, African American teachers served as a symbol of resistance against a system that disparaged African American culture and deemed it to be of little value. African American teachers worked against this White cultural norm and taught students to value their culture and its contributions to society. No teacher was a better example of this type of activist teaching than Dr. Herman Dreer.

### **Dr. Herman Dreer**

Born in Washington, D.C. around 1890, Herman Dreer was the son of southern migrants. His mother hailed from southern Virginia while his father was from Columbia, South Carolina. In Washington, D.C., Dreer graduated from M. Street High School and then went on to attend Bowdoin College in Maine. At Bowdoin, he graduated Magna Cum Laude and was elected into Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society all in three years. Continuing his education, Dreer received a Masters in Latin from Virginia Theological Seminary, finally becoming Dr. Dreer with his doctorate in sociology and anthropology from the University of Chicago ("Testimonial Dinner" 1969).

These outstanding academic achievements put Dr. Dreer on his ultimate path of working to educate the community on the history of African Americans. As the son of migrants, Dr. Dreer may or may not have been fully aware of the Southern culture and the lack of value placed

on African American experiences and accomplishments. Armed with numerous degrees, Dr. Dreer was now in the position to begin telling the true stories of African Americans and providing the community with a much needed counter-story to combat the mainstream narrative that was being taught as truth.

Arriving at Sumner High School in 1914 and serving on its staff for over twenty years, Dr. Dreer was influential in providing students with the truth of African American contributions to the country. These counter-stories, as explained by Dr. Dreer, helped instill a sense of pride and self-worth in African Americans and gave them a reason to believe in a better future. If African Americans were to believe the mainstream stories of their history and contributions, they would continue to be held as slaves and not seek the liberation they deserved (Dagbovie 1993).

Dr. Dreer was responsible for organizing the first Negro History Week in St. Louis in 1927 and worked to provide programs for school children and community members. Over the next ten years, Dr. Dreer's work was recognized by Carter G. Woodson, creator of Negro History Week. In his annual reports, Woodson described the success of the program in St. Louis and Dr. Dreer's commitment to educating children and adults on African American history (Woodson 1934). Woodson points out that Dreer was successful in St. Louis because he was able to gain the support of White officials and prominent Whites in the city. The support of Whites was important to both Dr. Dreer and Woodson because they believed that everyone needed to learn about African American history, not just African Americans (Dreer 1934; Woodson 1934).

Dr. Dreer's belief in the importance of African American history was directly tied to improving African Americans students' sense of self-worth and what their culture brought to the academic table. In other words, through history, Dr. Dreer was showing that African Americans had a rich culture that should be recognized and valued by all of society. This cultural capital of

African American students was reflected in the writings of Yosso (2005) as she presented an argument of inclusion analogous to Dreer's.

Because of Dr. Dreer's writings and actions, he was a man ahead of the times. Dr. Dreer's writings on the value of African American history and its relationship to the success of the community can be found in today's assessment of educational institutions. Dr. Dreer's philosophies reflect in today's theories of education starting with Landson-Billings' (1998) critical race theory and its relationship to education and continuing with Tara Yosso's (2005) cultural capital in the classroom. Dreer's insights based on his classroom experience advanced the education of the entire St. Louis community through his successful implementation of Negro History Week. His work not only provided the counter-stories for African Americans, but gave them feelings of self-worth through the accomplishments of their ancestors. No longer were African Americans seen as a people without a history. Dr. Dreer's teaching served as a form of resistance that armed the community with the knowledge that they did have a culture, a culture that was not only worth studying but worth celebrating.

### **Navigational Capital**

Before the African American citizens' councils could advocate for change in the schools they had to learn how to effectively navigate the White world. This navigational capital not only meant they knew how to achieve results, but they did it in a system that was not designed to serve African Americans. In this case, the schools may have been segregated and may have even had African American staff, but that did not mean the schools were designed to accommodate the needs of African American students. The main goal of the African American citizens' council was to make sure the needs of the African American students were met as they saw fit and not according to prescription by the White community.

The African American citizens' councils did not wait for the White school boards to provide an equal education for their students. In the case of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, the community demanded not only to be on the board, but to select who from the community would serve. Once the board was established, the president, M. M. Clark, navigated the White world of the AMA to acquire African American teachers. The Colored Citizen's Council and later the Central School Patrons Association did not have to fight to become organized, but they did have to struggle to get their voices heard by the White school board. All of the citizens' councils were composed of men who were able to navigate through the White institutions and come out victorious.

### **The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools**

St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was straightforward in their requests to the AMA about their needs. From the beginning in the group's constitution, they established their rights including the appointment of teachers. The use of an official document to secure these rights showed the educational level of the men on the board. As mentioned previously, the president, M. M. Clark, attended Oberlin College, so he had some education past the primary school level. His tenure at Oberlin also indicated that he had some understanding of a predominately white environment and how to navigate through the system. He may have known that in order for the group to have control of the schools they had to create a legally binding document and in that document they must include everything they wanted to accomplish. If their rights were not explicitly spelled out in the document, they would have a hard time governing the schools in a way that benefited African American students.

Once they had an official constitution, they turned their navigational skills to working with the national AMA office. While there were not a lot of letters from M. M. Clark, there were

enough to indicate his ability to communicate with the White leaders of the AMA and receive positive responses to his requests even while George Candee was hard at work against him. Clark's letters to the board were well written in outstanding penmanship, another indication of his level of education. Beyond the structure and appearance of the letters, the content reveals his prowess at working within the system.

In a letter to the AMA national office, M. M. Clark describes the ongoing conflict with a White AMA principal in St. Louis, Mr. Richardson. He explains that Mr. Richardson had disregarded any efforts by the newly formed board to reach out to him and work together in the schools. He states he tried to "harmonize" their efforts and eventually realized this could not be done. Realizing he was an African American man writing to a White audience, he also used Candee to vouch that he did try to work things out with Richardson. Clark tells the board, "Mr. Candee will inform you that I have used prudent means to get Mr. Richardson to connect both himself and his school with the board" (Clark 1864b).

A continuing analysis of the content of Clark's letter reveals his skill in navigational capital, as he asks the AMA to send them African American teachers as well as a "well educated colored man to serve our Board in the capacity of Superintendent" (Clark 1864c). Again using Candee to help further their cause, Clark asks Candee to also write a letter stating their request for African American teachers (Candee 1864h). This request shows that Clark realized that even though his authority was supported by the board's constitution, it was still important for him to have a White man reiterate his request for African American teachers if he hoped to secure their employment.

The letters between M. M. Clark and the national AMA offices reveal Clark's ability to effectively navigate the White educational system of the AMA. In his requests for African

American teachers he never mentions why it is important to employ African Americans instead of White teachers. This omission can be viewed as a strategic move by Clark to prevent the AMA from interfering in the board's hiring of teachers who could support the cultural capital of the students in the classroom. The letters also indicate that Clark realized he had to use Candee, a White man, as an ally in his requests in order to increase his credibility. The navigational capital exhibited by Clark allowed African Americans to make systematic gains in an educational system that was designed neither by them nor for them.

### **Central School Patrons Association**

Almost ten years after the opening of the new Sumner High School, some members of the Colored Citizens' Council formed the Central School Patrons Association and continued to advocate for the needs of African American students. The most pressing need for the group was the building of a second high school for African American students. While the group had lobbied the school board for the relocation of Sumner High School, for the building of a new school they took their argument to the White press, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. This use of the White press shows the group's acumen in navigating the White school board in order to obtain the desired results.

As early as 1916, the *St. Louis Argus* and the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* began running editorials and articles on the movement of African Americans from the southern states to St. Louis. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* ran an editorial, "The Southern Negro Exodus," which estimated the number of African Americans that left the South to be 125,000. The *St. Louis Argus* responded to this editorial a few days later by revising this estimate to be closer to one million African Americans leaving the South and more leaving each day ("Northward Movement

of the Negro” 1916). This increase in the city’s African American population caused Sumner’s already overcrowded classrooms to begin busting at the seams.

Two years later the *St. Louis Argus* continued the argument of overcrowding at Sumner High School by debunking the school board’s claim that the overcrowding was due to seasonal workers moving north. The article showed that students did not leave Sumner at the arrival of cold weather and that the school was gaining more students than it was losing each month. Built to hold 750 students, the school’s enrollment was 908 students (“Overcrowding at Sumner High School” 1918). The *St. Louis Argus* continued to run periodic articles and editorials about the overcrowding at Sumner High School, thanks in part to its editor, J. E. Mitchell, who served as chairman of the publicity committee of the Central School Patrons Association (Stevens 1927).

In 1922, the Central School Patrons Association issued a document prepared by Rev. George Stevens and signed by community leaders outlining the current conditions of the schools and their needs for improvement. The request included a high school east of Grand Avenue, the seventh and eighth grades taken from John Marshall School and placed back in a district school, a teacher’s college separate from Sumner High School, and college extension courses for teachers. Copies of the document were distributed to the community and the school board for consideration (Stevens 1927).

Because they did not receive a response to their request from the school board, the Central School Patrons Association took their fight to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, one of the city’s White newspapers. The group started by writing a brief letter to the editor that complimented the newspaper on its “progressive insight and stand for justice.” They then went on to say that thousands of African Americans subscribe to the newspaper and they would like to ask for their editorial support for school improvements (Stevens and McWorter 1922). The letter

was an example of navigational strategy on the part of the Central School Patrons Association. They appealed to the newspaper's sense of justice while also gently reminding them that African Americans supported their newspaper financially through subscriptions.

Following the letter, the newspaper ran an article entitled "School Improvement Desired by Negroes," which outlined the group's request listed above in more detail. It explained why a high school was needed for African American students east of Grand Avenue, using population numbers and traveling distance of students. The number of students at Sumner High School had exploded from the 908 in 1918 to more than 1,400, which was almost double the intended capacity of the school. The article reiterated the influx of African Americans from the South and its detrimental effect on the Negro school population ("School Improvement Desired by Negroes" 1922).

The article closed with the fact that the Central School Patrons Association had not received an answer from the school board on their requests. The board then informed the group that "their desires would be considered" ("School Improvement Desired by Negroes" 1922). This lack of a timely response could be the reason why the Central School Patrons Association had gone to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*—to pressure the board into making a decision. While they were able to get coverage of African American educational issues in the *St. Louis Argus*, the group needed to get their message in front of a White audience. This strategy by the group shows their knowledge of how to influence the White board to act on their demands.

Nine days after the article describing the demands of the Central School Patrons Association, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* ran an article describing the school board's response. The school board recognized that additional space was needed for African American students but did not agree to build a second high school. Instead, they proposed adding classrooms to Sumner



at a cost of \$70,000. The Central School Patrons Association was not happy with this solution nor was the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. The article transitioned from news content to editorial content by saying the request by the group was a matter of equity and justice, both of which African Americans were entitled to because they paid taxes (“Education for the Colored” 1922). The article ended by saying:

It was the duty of the Board of Education to the white population of St. Louis as well as to the colored to deal justly and helpfully in providing educational facilities for the colored population. (“Education for the Colored” 1922)

It was no coincidence that the editorial and article ran in the paper and that nine days later the board responded to the request. The Central School Patrons Association continued advocating for a new high school until finally the Board of Education approved the contract to build Vashon High School in 1925 (St. Louis Public Schools 1926). Named after educators George B. Vashon and John B. Vashon (*The Vashon Herald* 1928), the new high school could hold almost 2200 students (Board of Education of the City of St. Louis 1926).

The Central School Patrons Association used the White media to spread their message of educational need and equity to the larger White audience in St. Louis. The use of the media in this way exemplifies strategic planning on the part of the Central School Patrons Association, as well as a working knowledge of the best way to push the White establishment into responding to their requests. The Association gained the support of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, which carried the message to their White colleagues on the school board in the same way George Candee had carried the message of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools to the AMA. In order for African Americans to effectively navigate the educational system, they needed White allies, not to show them how to navigate the system but to pave the way.

## **Conclusion**

All three of the African American citizens' councils worked diligently to improve the African American community's future and preserve its past. Through very similar requests for buildings, African American teachers, and enhanced curriculums, the councils ensured that the cultural capital of the community was infused into the educational environment. The schools were more than a place to learn to read and write; they were a place that valued African American culture and, more importantly, valued African American students. This preservation and transformation of culture was vital to the development and future accomplishments of the African American community in St. Louis.

## **Chapter 7: Interest Convergence**

African American citizens' councils worked against legal and social racial barriers to attain educational equity. The legal barriers included court decisions from *Dred Scott v. Sanford* to *Plessy v. Ferguson* that were adjudicated to constrain the freedoms of African Americans and keep them within an inferior social class. The social barriers included the White cultural norms that existed to maintain segregation even when it was not legally required. St. Louis, a city caught between the politics of the North and the social norms of the South, treated African Americans as a group that had to be managed and controlled in order for Whites to preserve their unchallenged access to resources.

The idea of resource allocation based on unearned racial reputation lies at the heart of critical race theory and the tenets that help explain the preponderance of racism in society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, critical race theory provides a framework for looking at the world that places race clearly at the center. The first tenet looks at the prevalence of racism in society to the point that it has become so enmeshed that it is standard operating procedure. The second tenet critiques liberalism and specifically the use of the legal system to fight against racial injustice. The third tenet addresses whiteness as property that is unchallenged, positive, and passed down through generations (Taylor et al. 2009; Dixson and Rousseau 2005). This chapter explores the tenet of interest convergence and uses it to examine why citizens' councils in St. Louis achieved results for African American students in a system destined by and for the enjoyment of Whites.

The chapter opens with an explanation of interest convergence and its relationship to the historic educational milestone, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Though this legal event took place years after the African American citizens' councils examined in this study, it serves as one of the best representations of the perfect storm of White self-interest and African American demands meeting to produce an outcome that was heralded as a universal victory for the country. After the critique of *Brown v. Board of Education*, I analyze the role of interest convergence in the success of the African American citizens' councils. Though each council was part of a separate event, the reasons for their success are shared in three ways, the time period when they occurred, the nature of their requests, and their lack of local political power. Working together, these three factors allowed the citizens' councils to advocate successfully for educational equity. This equity was granted not because it was the morally right thing to do but because it did not damage the property interest of Whites.

At its most basic level the idea of interest convergence is the coming together of two interests that produce a result. These interests do not have to have shared benefits or even complementary interests. They just have to unite at the right time in the right place to allow for results that benefit all parties. In the case of critical race theory, interest convergence deals with issues of racial equality and how and when that equality is achieved. Legal scholar Derrick Bell explains interest convergence by saying that “the interests of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interest of Whites” (Taylor et al. 2009, 76). In this regard, why some racial remedies were hailed as successful should be re-examined; Bell tackles the desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Through an examination of the domestic and international landscape, Bell contends that desegregation was the result of White political interests and not a step towards racial harmony (Bell 1980; Dixson and Rousseau 2005; Douglas-Horsford 2011; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lipsitz 2011).

In 1954, after building up case after case against segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education* finally toppled the “separate but equal” doctrine established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. Focused on education and the unequal allocation of resources based on race, the case established educational equity for African Americans (Gates et al. 2012; Kluger 2004). With this victory, African Americans finally gained access to resources that would put them on equal footing with their White peers and allow them the same opportunities at success. But according to Derrick Bell, the belief in desegregation as providing equalization under the law reflected the world as it should have been and not how it was. Because of the country’s racial history, the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was not made based on principle, but instead decided because it advanced the political interests of Whites (Taylor et al. 2009).

Professor Bell was not the only legal scholar to have concerns about the Brown decision. A few years following the decision, legal professor Herbert Wechsler expressed concern over the decision, but for different reasons. For Wechsler, the decision was made without regard to principle, which caused him much concern. Using his invitation to deliver the Oliver Wendell Holmes lecture in 1959, professor Wechsler attacked the lack of principle present in the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Taking the Supreme Court to task, Wechsler argued that courts should make appraisals of laws based on principles and not rely on static historical interpretations. In other words, the courts had the responsibility to look beyond constitutional interpretations and archaic legal precedents to the principles that would create a more just society (Taylor et al. 2009).

Unlike Wechsler, Professor Bell did not object to *Brown v. Board of Education* on principle, which was more of an abstract idea aimed at a larger intangible concept that did not reflect the racial realities of the time. Bell's critique of the decision focused on how the eradication of segregation promoted the interests associated with White advancement more than the advancement of African Americans. Hailed as a victory for African Americans, the decision in Brown did more to secure and advance the social and financial security of Whites than of African Americans, who had turned to the courts to cure their racial ills.

Because of the time period, there were three factors that were of value to Whites that allowed the decision to halt the practice of desegregation. The first was the country's struggles with Communism and how to gain credibility in the eyes of necessary political allies around the world. It was difficult for the country to promote the benefits of democracy over communism when a caste system was legally in place. The second was the country's victory in World War II and its fight for equality and freedom. Similar to the fight against Communism, it was difficult

for the country to fight for freedom abroad while their own citizens were denied the most basic of freedoms at home. Finally, with the continued industrialization of the country and the transition from an agrarian society, the South would not prosper financially if it continued to cling to segregation (Bell 1980; Taylor et al. 2009).

Using Bell's analysis, it is easy to see how the interests of Whites in maintaining their dominance as a world political power and further securing their financial futures outweighed any advantages African Americans received from attending schools with Whites. Because of the other tenets associated with critical race theory, such as the permanence of racism and whiteness as property, African Americans were in no position to benefit from a legal victory that depended upon Whites for implementation. The success of *Brown v. Board of Education* gave the appearance of nationwide progress while not only maintaining the racial status quo but creating the environment for the next generation of Whites to prosper.

Though occurring in time periods different from the time of the Brown decision, the citizens' councils were the beneficiaries of the interest convergence. Because of the time period, the nature of their requests, and their limited political power, the citizens' councils successfully advocated to improve educational outcomes for African American students through the accumulation of resources in a way that did not threaten the property interest of Whites. In other words, the White community was willing to grant demands for new schools and better teacher training as long as the African American community was willing to remain segregated with no thought of racial integration. Through this unspoken agreement, the African American citizens' councils focused on making continued educational progress that prepared them for success in or out of a segregated society.

### **The Board of Education for Free Colored Schools**

The Board of Education for Free Colored Schools originated towards the end of a long and bloody war between the states over the future of slavery. The Southern states were fighting to maintain their source of free labor while the North was trying to abolish it and reunite the country. As slave state in the Union, Missouri felt the tension between the North and South and their struggles over the direction of the country (Primm 1998). Because of the war and the uncertainty it would bring in regards to the status of African Americans, both free and enslaved, the Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was in the position to secure certain gains that they might not have otherwise received if they had asked years earlier.

As mentioned in a previous chapter about the Dred Scott decision, the legal climate in Missouri was shifting from a liberal supreme court to one that was more conservative in their interpretation of the law. This shift was evident when Missouri, a state that had emancipated hundreds of slaves through freedom suits, closed the courthouse doors with the Dred Scott decision. This precedent established the legal foundation for the treatment of African Americans as non-citizens who were without any rights that society was bound to respect.

The legal claim for an education did not appear in Missouri until the creation of the 1865 State Constitution, which suggested that schools be established for African American students. Before that time, African Americans were educated in clandestine schools housed in church basements or by White missionary and benevolent leagues (Kremer 1991). African Americans' desire for an education outweighed the risk associated with getting caught, and this desire only grew stronger as freedom became a reality. The St. Louis African American community in 1864 took advantage of the country's inevitable transition to begin putting the pieces in place to realize their dream of freedom.

Though the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was located in St. Louis, it did not originate with actions taken by White community members. The Board was the creation of the American Missionary Association (AMA), a northern Christian benevolent society headquartered in New York. This distinction is important because it demonstrates the state's lack of attention to African American education and helps to clarify the interests of northern Whites in assisting African Americans. In other words, we can ask what benefits the AMA received from submitting to the demands of the St. Louis African American community and allowing them to create their own school board.

Based on the correspondence between George Candee and the AMA national offices, it is evident that the St. Louis African American community was not going to quietly stand aside while the AMA ran their schools and selected their leaders. This conflict was revealed in the letter that explained the first attempt at securing a school board. Instead of accepting the proposed board members, the community demanded that they select the ten African American men who would represent them. This demand was so great that they prevented the continuation of the community meeting and had to call a second meeting to come to a resolution.

As the financial backer and organizers of the schools, the AMA could have easily told the community that they would have to accept the board as presented or give up the opportunity to have schools. This ultimatum would not have been in the best interest of the AMA because it would have added credence to the belief that they were a paternalistic organization that was not interested in working with African Americans but rather in working to control their educational futures. With the end of the Civil War close at hand, it was important to the AMA to be able to continue establishing schools. By allowing the request from the community to select their



representation on the board, the AMA continued their work in the city and throughout the South without becoming embroiled in ideological conflicts that would distract them from their mission.

While the time period played an important role in the convergence of interests between the AMA and African American community, the requests made by the board were also important. Almost ten years after the Dred Scott decision and at the end of a civil war over slavery, the country was on the cusp of great change in the status of its African American population. Not enslaved and not citizens, African Americans had a small window of opportunity to begin laying the groundwork for their emancipation. Because it was a part of the Union, Missouri did not undergo as severe a political reconstruction period as that enforced upon its fellow slave holding states. Instead, it was left to decide how it would treat its newly freed population and which rights they would enjoy under the state's constitution (Primm 1998).

Because of the denial of citizenship rights both at the state and federal levels, the requests of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools centered on basic issues of control such as managing finances, hiring teachers and securing school facilities. They did not ask to attend school with White children, nor did they mention issues of educational equity, which would become the foundation of future requests by citizens' councils. Their requests allowed them the right to establish and run schools for African American students without infringing on or taking resources from the White community, though both groups paid taxes that supported the White schools.

The focal point of the requests from the board was the hiring of African American teachers. The White superintendent, George Candee, had mixed feelings about this request. At first he was supportive of the request, writing to the national offices to express his support. Towards the end of his tenure he expressed exasperation with the African American community

and their continued diligence on this subject. The school board did succeed in obtaining African American teachers, but at their own expense, raising money from the community for their room and board.

The national AMA was supportive of the use of African American teachers because it was not always easy to find White teachers willing to teach African American students in the South. In contrast to the prevailing image of young White women from New England serving in southern classrooms, the majority of teachers of both free and enslaved African American students in the South were African American (Butchart 2010). This use of African Americans allowed the AMA to continue their mission while at the same time giving the appearance of responding to the requests of the community.

Another reason the AMA was willing to grant the board's requests was that they did not go against the cultural norms of the region during that time period. If the AMA had traveled to the South and had begun calling for integration and social equality, they would have been quickly shut down by the White community. Instead, the AMA actually maintained the racial status quo of the South through its academic and social curriculums (American Free School Monthly Report 1864). Providing African Americans with skills that kept them in positions of labor to Whites allowed the AMA to continue creating schools with limited interference from some southern Whites frightened of losing the advantages their skin color provided.

The success of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools was due in part to the African American men who advocated for educational change and in part to the change that was sweeping the country. With the Civil War coming to a close, the country was shaping the next phase in the relationship between the races. No longer slaves, but definitely not citizens, African Americans were relegated to a space that provided limited political rights, and no social

rights. Instead of working against this cultural landscape, the AMA worked within it as it worked to launch schools in the southern states. The interests of the St. Louis African American community were served because not only did they get schools, but they governed the schools, making decisions about finances and staffing. The AMA interests were being served because the organization was able to continue creating schools throughout the South, which sustained its mission, enabled it to raise funds for support and allowed it to continue to survive as an organization. The interests of the African American community were small concessions made by the AMA in comparison to the larger benefits derived from the organization and its role in African American education in the South.

### **The Colored Citizens' Council**

Continuing the work started in 1864, the Colored Citizens Council was a group of prominent African American men who joined together to advocate for educational equity against the White school board that had absorbed the African American schools created by the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools. Ten years after the absorption of the African American schools, the St. Louis Board of Education established a high school, the first of its kind west of the Mississippi. Though an educational milestone when it first opened in 1875, Sumner High School, more than thirty years later, was in desperate need of improvements in order to bring it up to par with the White high schools. Starting with a new building, followed by better teacher training and a more rigorous curriculum, the Colored Citizens' Council fought for the educational equity promised under the "separate but equal" doctrine sanctioned by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.

Unlike 1864, the time when the Colored Citizens' Council was operating was not a time of civil unrest that would provide an answer to the question of slavery. By 1907 the country was

more than forty years past that peculiar institution, twenty-five years past Reconstruction, and less than ten years past legalized segregation. Because of the laws and policies put in place to enforce the segregation of African Americans, the Colored Citizens' Council had the law on their side when advocating for educational enhancements. As has been shown in previous cases, the law does not always favor African Americans when it is used to seek out racial remedies (Kluger 2004). Instead of seeking parity in court, the Colored Citizens' Council referenced it in their request with the threat of legal action left up to the reader's interpretation.

The racial climate in St. Louis was heavy with segregation, from the schools to the parks to housing. The local newspapers reflected the city's undeniable connection to the Deep South with stories about neighborhood organizations trying to prevent "Negro Invasions ("Negro School Site Depends on Park Vote" 1908). Against this backdrop the Colored Citizens' Council successfully lobbied for and received improved educational conditions for African American students. This success may have been in part due to the community's coming together, but was more likely due to the White community's intense desire to maintain segregation and the Colored Citizens' Council's decision not to advocate for school integration.

Though the Colored Citizens' Council did not mention school integration, its leader, George Stevens, did urge African Americans to admit that they wanted social equality from the streetcars to the classroom. Stevens believed that the current misunderstanding between the races was due to their limited interaction and that by attending the upper grades together they would become better future citizens of the United States ("Urges Negroes to Demand Equality" 1905). This mention was the only reference found advocating racial integration in the schools. Because the argument was not pursued, it can only be assumed that Stevens did not have the full support of the African American community to go in this direction. Instead, years later he did

receive support when advocating for the new Sumner High School and did not try to encourage an integrated high school.

The atmosphere of segregation was further demonstrated when in 1906 the St. Louis Board of Education had to condemn a building in order to acquire it for use as an African American school. The board attempted to purchase the property from the owner, but failed repeatedly because he insisted on including a clause that prevented it from being a “Negro” school, even though it was located in an African American neighborhood. In addition to the battle over the school location, one of the board members objected to the proposed plans to include architectural decorations and towers similar to those in place at the White high schools. He felt they served little benefit and were an unnecessary expense when it was suggested they be used for the African American school (“School Site by Force” 1906, 8). Not only did this attitude suggest the extent that the board was willing to go to in order to maintain segregated schools, but the little ways they continued to show favor to White schools over African American schools.

In an environment that embraced the idea of separation, but not the idea of equality, the Colored Citizens’ Council used this doctrine as the foundation for their request. Less than ten years after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Colored Citizens’ Council understood the political landscape and formulated a strategy that fell within the bounds of legal and social precedents. Having experienced the conflicts over residential segregation, school locations, and access to community spaces, the Colored Citizens’ Council realized that any requests that included racial integration would be immediately dismissed, endangering the success of the entire proposal. Without access to the archives of the Colored Citizens’ Council I found it difficult to determine the extent to

which integration was discussed, but because it was not included in the final proposal, I have concluded that it was not favored by a large majority of the council.

Throughout the *Complaint*, the Colored Citizens' Council made requests that put the African American schools on par with the White Schools. These requests included not only a new building, but an enhanced curriculum, better teacher training, and access to social activities. Using the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision to bolster their requests without ever mentioning the case by name, the Colored Citizens' Council took advantage of the White community's intense fidelity to segregation by making them live by the laws they created. The result was that the African American community received a new school, though at a lesser cost than the White high schools, and segregation was permitted to continue unchallenged.

### **The Central School Patrons Association**

Segregation came to a head in 1916 with the campaign to create residential segregation in the city. This ordinance prevented African Americans from freely moving into certain parts of town while maintaining Whites' ability to reside in the more desirable neighborhoods. Not unique to St. Louis, this type of residential ordinance was being placed on ballots in other border cities such as Baltimore and Louisville, places that did not share the strict segregation of the South but still wanted a mechanism for managing the mobility of the African American population. The appearance of this ordinance further illustrates St. Louis's desire to legally expand segregation beyond the de facto nature that was currently in place.

While it was difficult to assess the community's desire for segregation before the ordinance, the situation was simplified after the ordinance passed. Winning by an overwhelming majority, the ordinance solidified St. Louis's cultural connection to the Jim Crow laws of the South while the city continued to portray itself as a progressive northern city ("Saint Louis, The

Fourth City” 1915). Even though the ordinance was eventually overturned in the courts, it still won by the vote of the people and proved the city’s intolerance for racial integration.

Similar to the Colored Citizens’ Council in 1907, the Central School Patrons Association also worked against a cultural backdrop that was unwavering on the issue of segregation. Made up of some of the same community members, most notably pastor George Stevens of Central Baptist Church, the Central School Patrons Association made similar requests and continued to adhere to the “separate but equal” doctrine for its rationale (“The School Board Strikes Again” 1924). Like the citizens councils that came before it, the Central School Patrons Association focused on issues that had a chance of being resolved and did not mention the idea of school integration, an obvious political and social dead end.

The passing of the segregation ordinance exhibited the lack power possessed by the St. Louis African American community. Even with interracial coalitions, weekly editorials in both *The St. Louis Argus* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and large community meetings, the African American community did not have the power at the voting booth to control their own destiny. Their only hope for relief against oppressive local and state laws was through the courts, and this method rarely worked in their favor, especially concerning issues related to education. Recognizing their chances in court, the Central School Patrons Association made veiled threats to seek legal recourse (“Resolutions sent to the School Bo’rd” 1922) but did not follow through. Instead they focused their energy on a long sustained fight with the school board to perform their duty on behalf of all students in the district (“Education for the Colored” 1922;).

As their fight with the school board continued, the African American community expanded its requests from school buildings and teacher training to access to school governance by requesting a seat on the St. Louis Board of Education (“Wants a Negro on the School Board”

1924). This request was different from that of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools more than fifty years earlier for a variety of reasons. First the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools managed only African American schools. Second, the Free Colored Schools board was not a public school board elected by the people of the city, but instead a board developed by a northern White benevolent association. Finally, that board was developed during a time when the slavery issue was still being decided and the social and political status of African Americans was undecided.

The appeal for a seat at the governance table may have been the request that pushed the school board into seriously considering the Central School Patrons Association's other demands. Under the auspices of the NAACP, T. A. Curtis, also a member of the Central School Patrons Association, wrote a letter to the mayor calling for him to appoint an African American to a vacant school board position. The NAACP felt by making such an appointment, the mayor would be showing his gratitude for the support of the African American community in both of his elections. It would also be a way for an African American to get representation without having to appeal to the community in an election ("Wants a Negro On The School Board" 1924).

The fact that an African American was unable to gain enough votes to serve on the school board harkened back to the 1916 segregation ordinance and the community's continued lack of political power. In the letter, Curtis claimed that the city had more than one hundred thousand African Americans upholding their civic duty and they deserved representation. This number reflected the continued influx of African Americans fleeing the South to find better opportunities in the North and the continued strain on city services ("Schools Become Big Issue Since Negro Migration" 1923). The migration may have created crowded conditions in schools and housing, but it also increased the voters within the African American population.



Unable to win a seat on the school board through an election, the African American community's request to the mayor served two purposes. First, it helped remind him that the African American community helped get him into office, not once, but twice. Second, it showed the White school board that African Americans were not going to back down from their requests and were even going to escalate them by requesting the power of governance. Though the mayor did not appoint an African American to the school board at that time, this request did accelerate a response from the school board in making some changes. That September the schools hired three new African American principals, a step that was exalted in the press as "inspiring confidence in the school board on the part of colored people in the city than anything that has been done by that body in many years" ("The New School Principals" 1924).

The White school board finally granted a few of the requests of the Central School Patrons Association after stalling for almost five years. The decision to establish an open-air school for children inclined to contract tuberculosis was announced just a few months before the big announcement of a new African American high school east of Grand Avenue. These successes for the Central School Patrons Association were possible not only because of the hard work of the men in the organization, but because of the strategies they employed. Always keeping in mind the racial environment, the group did not push for integration with Whites, but instead asked for equality of resources. They also had experience with the law and recognized its limitations in providing timely remedies, so instead they sought access to power via the school board. This request to the mayor was a long shot, but it did indicate the African Americans' serious commitment to education and the lengths they would go to in order to attain equality.

The White school board held off the demands of the Central School Patrons Association as long as they could before they were forced to take action. Since the board indicated little interest in responding to the group until they asked the mayor for an appointment to the school board, it can be deduced that this request alarmed the board in some manner. Similar to a court case with the decision out of the public hands, the appointment by the mayor could have gone against their desire to maintain a White school board. While there is no evidence of discussion between the school board and the mayor, it is only logical to conclude that they were in collaboration around the new appointee. Even if he never intended to appoint an African American, the mayor could have encouraged the school board to give in to some of the community's requests as a way of placating them without having to share governance power. The interests of the Central School Patrons Association were met in the building of a new high school east of Grand Avenue, and the interests of Whites were met by maintaining exclusive rights to positions on the school board.

### **Conclusion**

African American citizens' councils in St. Louis were successful because they advocated for educational equity for students and received results. The results took years of hard work, lobbying, and veiled threats to achieve, but in the end, the African American students were better off because of the work of the councils. Each council functioned within a very different time period, but the councils had similar requests. From school facilities to teachers, the demands of the councils reflected their common goal of uplifting the race through education. This goal of racial improvement was often obstructed by the White community, who did not want African Americans to reach for social and political rights that would infringe upon their own rights. If

African Americans received any concessions from Whites, it was due in part to the interests of Whites converging with the interests of African Americans at the right time and the right place.

The idea of interest convergence being responsible for some of the success of the citizens' councils does not detract from the hard work of the councils. In fact, the councils used this interest to their advantage in their strategy to gain results from the White school board. During the time period of each of the three councils, segregation was firmly established and continued to be reinforced through the legal system. Instead of fighting against segregation, the councils requested changes that were in line with the social and legal landscape of the day and kept the races firmly apart. This due diligence to segregation may have seemed like an acceptance by the community, but it was a prudent and realistic strategy by the African American community, who did not have the political power to make policy changes at the state level. Instead, they focused on using segregation to their benefit to force the school board to follow the "separate but equal" doctrine that was designed to establish equality through separation.

Through the use of segregation as a tactic, the citizens' councils did not threaten the property interests of Whites. The idea of interest convergence meant that both sides' interests were being met, but it also meant that the property interests of Whites were being protected at the expense of the interests of the African American community. An example from the citizens' councils was the building of Sumner High School. In this case the school was built, but at a cost that was dramatically lower than the cost of a comparable White high school. This discrepancy in allocation of funds allowed Whites to maintain their economic resources to spend on White students, but appeared to provide a benefit to African Americans, whose taxes supported the continued inequities.

African American citizens' councils had to find ways to achieve success within the racial realities of St. Louis. Not pushing beyond the boundaries of legal and social acceptance, the councils worked hard to use the laws of segregation and Whites' fears of declining property values to their benefit. The interest of Whites in maintaining segregation and preventing African Americans from moving into governance positions on the school board played a role in the overall success of the councils. What role it played was difficult to determine based on the archival information available from the St. Louis Board of Education and the citizens' councils. Regardless of the role interest convergence played in the success of the citizens' councils, it does not diminish the enduring advocacy of the African American community in working for and achieving educational equity in St. Louis.

## **Chapter 8: African American Citizens' Councils and Current Educational Issues**

Through their hard work and commitment to the community, African American citizens' councils created opportunities for educational equity in St. Louis. Starting before the Civil War, African Americans came together to advocate for the right to an education, an education that would move them out of servitude and onto the path towards citizenship. Once the right to an education was established, African Americans fought for equity as guaranteed by the segregation laws designed to maintain the country's racial hierarchy. With every roadblock placed in their way, African American citizens' councils persevered and continued to advocate for the resources to produce positive outcomes for the community.

The three African American citizens' councils in this study developed at different time periods but shared some common themes. First of all, the councils were similar in that they all three wanted control over their schools in some form. For the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools it was the creation of a board that represented their interests. For the Colored Citizens' Council, control was the council's ability to lobby the school board to make changes. Though this was not the same as having a representative on the school board, it was progress for the African American community to have their voices heard.

The second similarity among the three councils was the value of school buildings. The first schools for African American students were makeshift schools created in local churches and even a hotel. Once it became law to provide an education for African Americans, the school district provided inadequate facilities in undesirable parts of town. These schools were in sharp contrast to the schools provided for the White students, which were new and located in beautiful surroundings. The Colored Citizens' Council and the Central School Patrons Association fought

for and received new school buildings that not only provided an education but served as the foundation for community development.

The final similarity of the citizens' councils was their unwavering demands for African American teachers and principals. Almost every letter from the president of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools to the AMA included a request for Colored teachers. The hiring of Colored teachers was so important to the board that it was included in their constitution. The desire for African American teachers continued with the Colored Citizens' Council and the Central School Patrons Association. None of the councils gave reasons for this almost non-negotiable request that kept coming up with each new set of demands. The citizens' councils' reasons for desiring African American teachers reflected their need to affirm and disseminate their cultural heritage while creating a strong middle-class community.

The three aspirations expressed by the citizens' councils functioned together to lead to the valuing of African Americans and their citizenship right to a quality education. However, the right to an education, which was determined to be a state right and not a federal right, was a constant battle. The citizens' councils were forced to fight the school board to ensure they received the rights guaranteed to them in the state's constitution. This ongoing quest for educational equity epitomized the struggles of African Americans for citizenship rights in a country that once deemed them little more than property.

The citizens' councils are an important narrative in the story of African American advocacy in St. Louis. Their story documents African American involvement during time periods of increased racial restrictions and discrimination. The councils demonstrated the ability of African Americans to join together against the White community to create a strategic and sustained plan of action that led to success. Most importantly, the work of the citizens' councils

represented the desire of African Americans to evolve from laborers like their ancestors to leaders in the community. Instead of providing a future for others, African Americans were ready to chart their own course.

The issues addressed by the citizens' councils are just as relevant in today's urban educational landscape. More than 150 years later, St. Louis still struggles with educational equity and ways to provide an education for African American students. This final chapter takes the three main issues of the citizens' councils—school control, resources, and African American teachers—and demonstrates how they have remained issues in the St. Louis public school system. Coupled with these issues is the continued presence of race and the role it plays in preventing sustained change from taking place. The on-going connections between race and education are examined using critical race theory applied to recent educational issues. The chapter concludes with recommendations for educational advocacy based on the work of the African American citizens' councils. If educational equity is ever going to become a reality for African Americans, the narrative supplied by the citizens' councils may be the roadmap to success.

### **Control of Schools**

In order to create change in the distribution of resources in a school district, community members must have access to the school board in the form of seats at the table. The St. Louis African American community recognized this fact as early as 1864 when it insisted on creating their own school board, the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, to run the schools. Led by church and community leaders, this board was made up of African Americans who understood the needs of the community and were willing to advocate on its behalf. Though

it lasted for less than year, the board demonstrated the potential power of a school board in creating opportunities for African American students and teachers.

The White community also recognized the power of the school board and worked hard to prevent African Americans from becoming members until the late 1920s. This lack of access to the decision-making process reinforced the historical class dynamics that required African Americans to plead their case to Whites, who would then decide if their requests would be granted. This power dynamic was present in both the Colored Citizens' Council and the Central School Patrons Association because they were dependent upon the school boards to recognize their requests and to implement them. If African Americans were afforded membership on the school board, it would give them a voice in determining not only the education of African Americans, but the education of Whites as well.

The elected school board is a staple of democracy in the United States (Reed 1982). Since education was deemed a state issue and then, even closer to home, a local issue, the governance of school districts has been determined by local elections. In Missouri, the idea of locally elected school boards was threatened in 2007 when the Missouri State Board of Education, with the help of the City of St. Louis Mayor's office, decided to step in and take control of the St. Louis Public Schools district. The district's failures were well documented as being both excessive and enduring, and only by shaking up the governance structure would permanent change have a chance of taking hold ("Urgency and Outrage" 2007).

### **Special Administrative Board**

In 2007, after years of revolving leadership, financial mismanagement, and lackluster academic achievement, the Missouri State Board of Education took over control of the St. Louis Public Schools and appointed a three-person special administrative board. Taking the place of



the traditional seven-member elected board, the special administrative board was put in charge of all policy and governance decisions for the provisionally accredited district. This new board was made up of appointments by the governor, the president of the board of alderman, and the city mayor and included two African American members and one White member, who served as the board's president (Giegerich 2007a; Hunn 2007).

With the creation of the special administrative board, the elected board was stripped of their traditional duties as a school board. They were reduced to functions such as "audit" which was not clearly defined by the state board. In addition to their decrease in duties, they were also no longer involved in decision making for the district and became little more than a discussion group at best and a distraction at worse. Before the state takeover, the elected board had been a regular story in the news with unflattering accounts of unruly meetings and dismal governance procedures. Such behavior became one of the reasons given for the installation of the special administrative board (Mink 2006; Giegerich 2007b)).

By removing the elected board and replacing it with an appointed board, the State Board of Education took away the community's local control of the school district. It could be argued that the board was still locally controlled because the mayor and the president of the board of alderman, both city officials, appointed two of the board members. This argument was a bit of a stretch and discounted the community's ability to select their own representation through the election process. A few vocal members of the community protested the state takeover and staged sit-ins at the mayor's office and even went to the state capital in a final effort to keep control of the district (Giegerich 2007c; Giegerich 2007b). This group of individuals fighting for school control was reminiscent of past citizens' councils, but did not possess the organization and strategy necessary to create a sustained advocacy plan. After the final protester left the mayor's

office and the last sign was waved in front of the state capitol, the group deteriorated to doing nothing more than producing random fliers of protest and the occasional outburst at school board meetings. Without much of a fight, the St. Louis community lost control of its schools.

### **Access to Resources**

In order to create real and sustained change, a group with a stake in the outcome of a decision must be included in the decision-making process, especially concerning resource distribution. This access to resource distribution was evident in the Colored Citizens' Council when they lobbied the school board for a new high school for African Americans. Without a seat on the school board, African Americans had to find other ways to fulfill their educational needs. In order to get a new school, the Colored Citizens' Council put together a fourteen-page plan complete with data and sketches outlining the current situation and their request for improved educational facilities, curriculum, and teachers. In today's educational reality, instead of looking to build new schools, the African American community is faced with school closures as the student population in the City of St. Louis continues to decline.

### **School Buildings and Closures**

Since 2002 with the hiring of Alveraz & Marsal, a professional services firm, to run the district, the St. Louis Public Schools has continually shuttered school buildings. Starting with more than 110 schools in 2002, the district currently operates 72 schools for 25,000 students. As the school population dwindled, the need for school buildings declined and it became more cost effective to close and combine schools (Wagman 2003b; Wagman 2004). In the early years of school closings there was an outcry from the African American community, but as the years went on, the response waned and now it is an accepted reality that schools will continue to close (Wagman 2003a;).

The closing of school buildings does more community damage than educational damage. As demonstrated when the new Sumner High School opened in 1911, a school had a way of stabilizing a community. Not only was the building used to educate the children, but it became a community center that provided opportunities for growth both inside and outside of its doors. During segregation, families lived near schools and created a familial environment that extended beyond the school doors. Teachers and administrators lived in the community and became role models for what was possible. The opening of new schools created thriving communities while the closing of schools was the fastest way to neighborhood decline and disinvestment.

While the African American community did not come together to stop schools from closing in their communities, the White community has come out in full force each time and has kept their schools open. Starting with the proposed closure of Wilkerson Roe in 2006 up to recent proposal to close Mann elementary school, White parents and community members have taken to the microphone and feverishly advocated for their schools (Crouch 2013e). The parent group from Wilkerson Roe developed a plan to add grades to the school, transitioning it from a K-3 school to a K-5 school. With this new structure the parents promised to not only keep their kids in the school, but help recruit others. In 2011, Cleveland ROTC high school was on the chopping block due to low enrollment and less than stellar test scores. Led by the White female principal, the school rallied parents to petition the board to keep the doors open (Crouch 2013c). This interracial group included students and parents, but the people who spoke at the board meeting were White.

Similar to the advocacy for board control, African American citizens' councils developed strategic plans using data to support their arguments for new schools. In the case of the new Vashon High School, the Central School Patrons Association actually debunked the school

board's misguided belief that the African American school population would decline after the harvest season. Instead it actually increased, which demonstrated the need for a second high school. In contrast, African Americans currently have not united or brought a plan of any type in front of the special administrative board to prevent school closings. Instead of advocacy, the work of the African American community has been more an unorganized dissent with person after person coming to the microphone and yelling at board. In the end, the board has made the decision to close schools and in effect destroy the African American community, one neighborhood at a time.

### **African American Teachers/Administrators**

While the school building may have served as the heart of the African American community, the teachers and administrators were the blood that kept it alive. Through their hard work and dedication both inside and outside of the classroom, African American teachers and administrators prepared future generations to lead by instilling knowledge and a sense of cultural pride. It was for these reasons that all three citizens' councils were adamant about the use of African American teachers though they did not share these reasons with the White board or community. The St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools felt so deeply about hiring African American teachers that they put this requirement in their constitution. The Colored Citizens' Council and the Central School Patrons Association did not have to fight for the hiring of African American teachers. Instead, they fought for professional development and the creation of a Normal School that was on par with the school for White teachers. Today, the hiring of African American teachers is threatened by alternative teacher programs such as Teach for America that work to replace certified African American teachers with non-certified White teachers (Delpit 2012).

## **Teach for America**

Started in 1990 by Wendy Kopp, Teach for America has the mission of creating a growing movement of leaders who work to ensure that kids growing up in poverty get an excellent education. Called “corps members” the Teach for America teachers are graduates of the top colleges in the country who commit to teaching in inner city and rural districts for two years. The commitment is only two years because corps members are encouraged to go on and become policy makers for educational issues and branch out into other fields such as law, healthcare, and politics (Teach for America 2012). Teach for America alums include former chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public schools Michelle Rhee, KIPP founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, and current Newark, New Jersey, schools superintendent Cami Anderson. All are examples of individuals who moved from teaching to becoming recognized and influential players in the world of urban education after only a couple of years in the classroom.

Teach for America has always had its critics, mostly from the education field, which bristled at the idea that five weeks of training prepared recent college graduates with the tools to be effective in some of the country’s most challenging classrooms (Heilig and Jez 2010)). Armed with only a cursory knowledge of teaching pedagogy and cultural competence, many corps members are placed in classrooms that do not even match with their majors if the district has a specific need, such as special education or math and science. So not only are the corps members ill prepared for the classroom, but they often lack sufficient content knowledge, something that is not tolerated of traditional teachers.

To help get around the lack of skills and knowledge of the corps members, the organization works with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to ensure that the minimal training they provide allows the corps members to be considered “highly

qualified” as teachers and therefore not count against the district in terms of accreditation. The ability to be considered qualified with little training reflects the privilege granted to corps members because of the color of their skin. While African American teachers in St. Louis City were getting “Reduction in Force” notices, the district continued to commit to hiring sixty to seventy new corps members a year.

St. Louis was not the only district hiring Teach for America corps members while firing experienced African American teachers. After the levees broke in New Orleans and the school district was in the process of rebuilding, it turned to Teach for America to help replenish its teaching pool. Instead of trying to rehire the over 7,000 employees laid off after the hurricane, the district worked with Teach for America and brought in new teachers. This hiring decision resulted in the awarding of a 1.5 billion dollar settlement to the employees in a class action suit (Holpuch 2013). The teachers in Chicago suffered the same fate when in 2013 more than 1,000 teaching jobs were lost due to school closures. Even with the decrease in schools, the school board still added more than 325 new corps members in addition to the 270 already on their payroll. This increase cost the district 1.6 million dollars (McCauley 2013).

To date there has been little outcry from the St. Louis African American community in regard to Teach for America. Presented to the community in 2001 as the answer to St. Louis’s teacher shortage, Teach for America was supported by the mayor’s office and funded by Civic Progress and the Regional Business Council, organizations made up of the area’s leading White business leaders (“City Schools Will Get 50 to 60 New Teachers” 2002). Working with the district, Teach for America placed mostly young white women in classrooms with little thought for the need for African American teachers, and the district never asked for any. As the critics of Teach for America get louder, there is starting to be some backlash against the organization at

the board level. Recently the St. Louis Public Schools superintendent put the organization on notice in terms of the number of African American teachers he expects to have in St. Louis each year. If these numbers are not met, the district has the right not to renew the contract. While this is a step in the right direction, it is not enough for the superintendent and one board member to question the use of Teach for America. Dissent needs to take place at the grassroots level with community members taking the lead.

### **Critical Race Theory and St. Louis Educational Issues**

The lack of sustained and meaningful involvement by the African American community in St. Louis does not rest solely on the community, but on the vestiges of racism that continue to permeate and influence societal outcomes. With the election of an African American president in 2008, the county was believed to have become a “post-racial” America, one in which race no longer mattered and success was based on hard work and achievement. This myth of meritocracy was not true in the 1990s when it was being touted by authors of color such as Shelby Steele (1991) and Thomas Sowell (2002), and it is even less true today. The country may have a second-term African American president, but that is not St. Louis. St. Louis has a fourth-term White mayor who has done little but antagonize the African American community. St. Louis has a White business community that acts as a paternal organization (very similar to the American Missionary Association) that appears to be working to improve educational outcomes for African American students but instead maintains the racial status quo. Finally, and most important, St. Louis remains a southern city that every few decades tries to rebrand itself as progressive and forward thinking only to expose its racist tendencies in policies and decisions designed to disempower the African American community.

From the building of Vashon High School in 1927 to today, there have been dozens of possible examples, both educational and otherwise, that show how race remains the key obstacle to progress in the African American community. From the use of restricted deed covenants in housing to the federally sanctioned volunteer transfer program to the firing of the first African American fire chief, St. Louis is a region ripe with stories of race that have nothing to do with race (Wagman 2008). In keeping with issues of education, the critical race tenets are used to briefly examine a recent educational issue in the region, the transfer program. Based on a recent legal decision determined by the Turner case, the transfer program allows students in unaccredited school districts to transfer to nearby accredited districts with the transportation and tuition costs absorbed by the student's home district. This educational situation demonstrates the race-based decisions that continue to cause harm in the African American community.

### **Student Transfer Program**

In June of 2013, the Missouri Supreme Court overturned the decision by a lower court that claimed that it was impossible to enforce a state law that gave students in unaccredited districts the right to transfer to accredited districts. Originally brought by White parents living in St. Louis city who paid tuition to send their children to Clayton schools, the Turner case opened the floodgates at three unaccredited districts in the state, Kansas City, Normandy, and Riverview Gardens. With the law on their side, students in these three districts now had the right to transfer to the accredited district of their choice with their home district paying the bill (Crouch 2013d).

While students in unaccredited districts had the right to attend the school of their choice, the districts were only required to provide transportation to the receiving districts of their choice. To help make the decision, the districts looked at neighboring district's academic rating, number of available seats, and tuition costs. Using these criteria, Riverview Gardens selected Mehlville



and Kirkwood as their receiving districts while Normandy selected Francis Howell. (Crouch 2013b; Bock and Crouch 2013). As soon as the announcement of the receiving districts went public, their superintendents began finding reasons why they could not take as many students as the sending districts predicted.

In the case of Mehlville, for the first time ever, the board immediately passed a resolution shrinking its class sizes. Stating that class size had always been a problem in the district, the superintendent said this reduction puts the class size closer to the desirable level. This decrease in class size reduced the number of available spots for transfer student to about 150, down from the almost 1,000 possible due to the declining enrollment (Crouch 2013a). Kirkwood quickly followed Mehlville's lead and claimed that they only had space for about 100 transfer students claiming that this number would decrease as they registered resident students. Voicing both concern and support at a community meeting, some parents actually wondered if the Riverview Gardens students would take their children's places on the school's sports teams (Bock 2013b).

Mehlville and Kirkwood were not alone in their negative reaction to the idea of student transfers. Francis Howell, the district that would receive students from Riverview Gardens, held a community meeting that was eerily reminiscent of the 1950s and school desegregation. Speaking in coded language, careful never to mention race, the parents spoke of safety concerns and demanded metal detectors be placed in the buildings. Moving onto academics, parents shouted that their students "worked hard for those scores" and the teachers would have to spend all of their time with the Riverview Gardens students because they were so far behind. A few of the audience members expressed their embarrassment at the comments by their White peers, while a former school board member summed it up by stating, "I'm ashamed of what I am hearing here, but they are scared." (Bock 2013a).

## **Permanence of Racism**

The response by the school districts and the communities to the transfer students reflects the racism that still exists in the St. Louis region. Though the language of race was never spoken, it was the foundation of every reference to concerns about safety and academics. While it is easy to say the comments do not reflect the entire community and many parents, teachers, and students welcome the transfer students, it is hard to ignore the institutional racism displayed by the boards and superintendents in the form of a numbers game.

Similar to the St. Louis Board of Education back in 1918 when it claimed that the African American student population would decline with the harvest season so there was no need for an additional high school, the receiving districts used numbers to prevent African American students from entering their schools. The Mehlville school board even went so far as to pass a resolution on class size for the first time ever. If class size was an on-going issue as the superintendent claimed, why was it only addressed after they were faced with an influx of African American students? Kirkwood was just as guilty of a numbers game by providing a low number with the prediction that this number would decrease as it continued to enroll students who lived in the district. By the time the transfer student process was announced, it was past the time most families would be registering students, so again this was another way for the district to restrict access.

## **Whiteness as Property**

In addition to the permanent nature of racism, the reaction to transfer students also reflects the White community's strong desire to maintain the property rights associated with whiteness. This is evident in the comments concerning academic achievement and access to

sports teams. The outrage voiced in the community around these issues masked their fear of losing the privilege and reputation associated with being White.

The main reason Normandy and Riverview Gardens lost accreditation was due to their dismal academic achievement as measured by the state test. The loss of accreditation in Riverview Gardens was accelerated due their absorption in 2010 of the Wellston School District, which was already in academic decline. Coupled with financial and leadership issues, the state declared the districts unaccredited, which triggered the newly overturned Turner law allowing students to attend neighboring districts. The parents in the receiving districts believed that the transfer students would negatively affect their children's ability to receive an education. Instead of thinking about how the resources of their district could help the transfer students become better students, the parents were more concerned about how sharing these resources would mean less time and attention for their own children. In the language of critical race theory, the parents were angry about the challenge to their access to resources that the transfer students presented. The parents in the receiving districts were accustomed to receiving a wealth of resources for their children because of their race. The transfer program challenged that idea by legally stating that students in unaccredited districts had a right to resources that until that time had been the property of Whites.

In addition to the school day and academics, some parents were concerned about their children losing access to co-curricular activities, specifically sports. Based on the belief that African Americans were better at sports, some parents saw the transfer students as competition on the playing field instead of in the classroom. The meeting at Kirkwood did not mention a decline in the academic reputation of the school. Instead it focused on the sports teams and whether they would be able to collect the tuition money from Riverview Gardens. The parents

were concerned with their rights in the same way as the parents at Francis Howell, but their concerns centered on sports and finances instead of academics.

This sports connection was tied to the parents' concern about collecting tuition to add to the district's budget. In 2010 the Kirkwood district lost a bond issue to make improvements to its football stadium. In April 2013 the board voted against the same improvements claiming they were too costly and were not in the budget. Then in August 2013 the same board approved over four million dollars in stadium improvements (Peterson 2013). Instead of using the money gained from the influx of transfer students to improve their educational opportunities, the district chose to make improvements to their sports stadium. This financial decision by the board revealed that the board's real concern was not for the new transfer students and their success, but instead for the district's current White boosters who wanted a comfortable seat for the annual turkey day game against Webster Groves.

The fate of the transfer program continues to play out in the St. Louis region. As more predominately African American districts lose accreditation, they will join the ranks of Normandy and Riverview Gardens in fighting to educate students who remain behind while millions of dollars walk out the door to predominately White school districts. While the financial dilemmas created by the transfer program are daunting, they are nothing compared with the on-going racial realities that continue to plague the region.

In an editorial entitled, "How Region Reacts to School Transfer Decision Will Stamp St. Louis History" (2013), the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* describes the way the whole country was watching how the region handled this situation and says that we don't want to get a black eye because "adults are mucking it up." The editorial recognized that this situation was a long time coming due to the continued academic failures of urban school districts, even daring to cite some

race specific data to show the sending districts were predominately African American while the receiving districts were predominately White. What was most interesting about the advice offered by the newspaper's majority White editorial board was the suggestions for how to begin a community-wide conversation about educational equity. The editors started by turning to school choice advocate Rex Sinqfield, asking him to spend his billions of dollars on buses so students would have a choice beyond the ones selected by the unaccredited districts. Next they suggested that the receiving districts use the tuition money to start charter schools in the unaccredited districts using the teachers, staff, and curriculum from the receiving districts. Their final suggestion was for lawmakers to admit this was about race. They did not ask the community to make this same admission, but instead looked to the people who were making the racist policies to arrive at a racial revelation and change their ways.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* editorial board was not always afraid to fight against racism when it appeared in legislative policies. In 1916, a couple of weeks before the vote on the segregation ordinances, the newspaper ran an editorial that once again stated their opposition. Entitled "How Segregation Works," the editorial expressed the belief that segregation was a violation of the constitution and the fundamental rights of American citizenship. They used an argument that is rarely used in regard to African Americans in terms of their property rights and their rights to enjoy said property. In addition to infringing on African American citizenship rights, the segregation ordinances also branded African Americans as undesirable and unfit to live near Whites. In the words of the editorial board, "The treatment of Negro citizens is regressive not progressive. It emphasizes and contributes to race prejudice and the racial demarcation of citizens. It makes a mockery of democracy and equal protection under the law ("How Segregation Works" 1916). While both editorials came out against the

disenfranchisement of African Americans and both even mentioned race, only the editorial in 1916 was bold enough to tie treatment of African Americans back to citizenship rights and the reinforcement of negative cultural stereotypes.

### **Citizens Councils**

Since the passing of the transfer law there have been few African American organizations coming to together to address the issue. Instead, there was an interfaith and interracial group that united to show their support for the families, teachers, and students in the affected districts. Writing a letter to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the group immediately condemned the hateful speech and racial stereotyping that occurred at many of the public meetings and in the letters to the editor. They called the transfer students a “blessing” to whatever community they joined and said that the region needed to demonstrate a common belief in humanity. The letter ended by referring to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and asking if the St. Louis community had the courage to continue the legacy of working towards desegregation. The group told the community that regardless of what policies were put in place, they must commit to equal opportunity and access for all students (Packnett 2013).

The signatures on the letter to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* included local pastors, founders of charter schools, executive directors of Teach for America and KIPP, a policy director for a local think tank in support of school vouchers, area business leaders, and one grassroots activist. This diversity in the coalition shows how deeply the transfer issue has touched so many people in the community and their desire to do something to make a difference. The difference between this group and the citizens councils described in my research is that this group lacks the depth to really create sustainable and meaningful change. Instead of creating a strategy that addresses the real problem in St. Louis, race, this group is content to attack the symptoms of the

problem such as education, housing, and job creation. The group did not confront the policy makers directly about the racially biased state tests and the fact that only predominately African American districts were unaccredited. According to their letter, the group seemed to accept the prevalence of racism in the region as something that must be worked around because it could not be changed.

The citizens' councils who worked to establish new African American high schools in St. Louis did more than write one letter to the newspaper. They created a strategy that included identifying the problem, providing evidence in the form of data to support their demands, and keeping the topic in the news as a reminder that the fight continued. Made up of local African American leaders, the councils used Whites when necessary to advance their cause, but they were not involved in the decision-making process. The African American community took the lead in advocating for educational equity. They were successful because their concerns were more than empty platitudes about social justice and school choice; African Americans were concerned about the future of the race.

### **Recommendations for Modern Day Educational Advocacy**

In order to begin effecting change in the educational landscape of the region, African Americans should look back to the strategies used by the citizens' councils. Working with very limited financial resources, the councils used the time and talents of the community to build their coalitions and lead them towards one goal. The councils determined that education was the community's most pressing need and its best chance at creating a generation that was ready to accept their citizenship rights and use them to create a better a future.

The African American community in St. Louis today needs to follow the strategy developed by the citizens' councils if they ever hope to improve educational outcomes for

African American students. The first thing African Americans must do is build a coalition composed of members with the skills necessary to carry out their goals. Once the coalition is established, they must unite around a common goal and develop a long-term strategy. In order to put their strategy in place, they need to take control of the schools by running candidates for the school board. Once they have a seat at the table, their work is not done. The coalition must work on all levels both within and outside of the system to effect change. This includes everything from preventing school closures to the hiring of African American teachers to the recognition and use of cultural capital in the classroom. The St. Louis public schools did not fall into failure overnight, and it will take time to make lasting changes. The community has to be committed to advocate for change if not for their own children, then for their grandchildren.

### **African American Coalition Building and Strategy Development**

Similar to today, the citizens' councils existed during times when there were many issues affecting the African American community. The transition from slavery to freedom, the legalization of racial segregation, and ongoing issues of violence in the form of lynching—all could have been addressed by the citizens' councils. Instead of spreading themselves too thin, however, the groups chose to focus on a singular issue, education, and to put all of their efforts into making strides that could become the building blocks for ongoing change. The first task of the councils was to put together coalitions of African Americans whose skills would benefit their advocacy work.

The coalitions were led by African ministers from M. Morrison Clark and the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools to George Stevens, who led both the Colored Citizens' Council and the Central School Patrons Association. The inclusion of ministers in the organization made sense because of the church's activist role in African American education and



their weekly captive audience that looked to them for guidance. The ministers were able to mobilize their congregants to help spread the word about community issues and volunteer to assist with the cause. In addition to ministers, teachers and school administrators were also important to the success of the councils. The teachers and administrators helped keep the councils informed about what was happening in the schools and could help secure the data necessary to support their demands for change. Because of the use of litigation to exclude African Americans from social, cultural, and political life, lawyers were important to make people aware of the laws and of ways to use them to their advantage. This was evident in the Colored citizens' references to equality with the White community.

Finally, and probably most important was the role the *St. Louis Argus* played in keeping the issues in front of the community. Tackling issues that today would be considered too sensitive or inflammatory, James Mitchell produced a paper that was a rally cry to the community to stand up and fight for their rights. While the paper covered national issues such as the increases in lynching and the southern migration, its focus was on how to create opportunities for progress in the St. Louis community. Each week the newspaper's editorial page encouraged, prodded, and at times shamed the community into becoming players in the fight for equality. Similar to Carter G. Woodson's magazine the *Crisis*, Mitchell was an arbiter for truth, and he used his newspaper in the same way the ministers used their pulpits.

Today, many African American organizations in the region try to tackle all of the issues that negatively impact the community instead of having laser focus on one issue. The Black leadership roundtable is the perfect example of such an organization that wants to effect change, but does not have the strategic direction to be successful. Comprising a make-up similar to that of the citizens' councils, the roundtable membership includes ministers, lawyers, educators, and

policy makers. At one point in time the Black leadership roundtable did focus on education, due to a grant from the federal government that allowed the organization to employ staff to focus on the achievement gap. Once this grant was gone, the organization no longer had the financial and staff resources to continue producing the necessary research to support its advocacy efforts.

In order to be effective a new citizens' council should be established whose sole focus is to create educational opportunities that produce positive outcomes for African American students. With this broad mission in mind, the council should select one issue, whether that is graduation rates, literacy, or the accreditation process, and put all of its resources towards advocacy in this area. Once this area is achieved, the council could then move on to the next issue. This is very similar to the actions of the Colored Citizens' Council, which fought for the new Sumner High School and then transitioned into the Central School Patrons Association and fought against school overcrowding. The people on the councils may have remained the same, but the issues changed because of the needs of the community.

Once a focus is determined, the new council must develop a strategy and that includes both short-term and long-term goals. The strategy should take into account the council members' strengths and use them to get the best results. The strategy should be well articulated, not only to the members of the council but to the African American community so that they can help support the advocacy effort. Even though they may not be formal members of the council, all members of the African American community should play a role in the advocacy efforts in order to prevent paternalism from taking hold and creating divisions that will further destroy any efforts at organizing for change.

### **School Board and Elections**

Once a coalition is built and a strategy is developed, the new council members must begin fighting for power by running candidates for the school board of their particular districts. While the citizens' councils of the past did not enjoy inclusion on the school board and were still able to create change, the times are different. Without a seat at the decision-making and policy-making table, today's African Americans will continue to be at the mercy of all White school boards that make detrimental decisions, such as Mehlville's reducing class sizes or Ferguson-Florissant's putting their African American superintendent on administrative leave without substantial cause. Because these schools boards do not have African American members, they are able to operate in a way that protects the interests of Whites at the expense of African Americans.

In order to get African American school board members, the African American community has to get out and vote. In 1916 when the city tried to pass two segregation ordinances, the *St. Louis Argus* spent every week telling people to get out and vote. Though the segregation ordinances won at the polls, the African American community recognized the importance of voting if they were ever to make citywide change. The same holds true for the education system. In order not only to create change but to prevent harm, African Americans must serve on school boards, especially in districts with a majority of African American students. Though it is still unfolding, the situation regarding the superintendent in Ferguson-Florissant is especially troubling because it is an all-White board controlling the educational opportunities for a school district that is more than 90 percent African American. The first goal of any group trying to advocate for change in Ferguson-Florissant should be not the reinstatement of the superintendent, but the election of African American board members in April 2014.

The election of school board members that support the council's educational goals should not be left to chance. Much like the City of St. Louis Mayor's office, which ran a slate of four candidates that allowed the mayor to control the school board, the citizens' council should be strategic in putting together a slate of candidates that will be able to serve as the majority decision makers on the board. Because of the timing of available board seats, the creation of an African American board majority may take some time, but this is where strategy is useful in creating long-term and short-term goals.

### **Working the System**

With a strategy in place and African American school board members in place that support the strategy, the citizens' council could begin working for change both within and outside of the system. Grass roots organizers would help rally the community through constant communication of the issue information about how they would help make the goals a reality. Those inside the system, the teachers and school board members, would be instrumental in providing relevant and timely information that would allow the council to monitor the district and collect the data necessary to support their stated goals. Without the data to back up claims of educational inequities, today's citizens' council would be nothing more than the unorganized and misinformed individuals that crowd every public meeting, shouting misinformation taken as fact.

One component of working the system is creating alliances with Whites who have access to the resources necessary to support the struggle for equality. All three of the citizens' councils in this study created such alliances, but never allowed Whites to have power in the councils to make decisions. This distinction is very important because it kept the advocacy in the hands of the community without the motives of Whites interfering with the council's goals. The idea of an exclusively African American council is a little more difficult in today's diverse environment.

There are many White stakeholders who are interested in issues of educational equity and may have a lot to contribute to the cause. That being said, it is still important for African American citizens' councils to be made up solely of members of the community who support the goals and strategy of the organization. Whites may have the best intentions and want to support educational equity, but in the end, the distribution of resources always comes down to race, and decisions are made that favor White students at the expense of their African American peers.

### **Conclusion**

The narrative of African American citizens' councils in St. Louis is just one of many potential stories of educational advocacy in the city. During this examination of the time period of the councils, individuals and organizations were uncovered that deserve more research than could be allotted in a single study. The men of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools were all identified, and their stories deserve more attention: Who were the men on the board? Why were they selected, and did they continue to be involved after their time on the board? Oberlin College came up frequently during the research of the 1860s because that institution provided many teachers to St. Louis through the American Missionary Association and was even the alma mater of the board president, M. Morrison Clark. Is there a narrative that can be developed about the alumni of Oberlin College and their role in the development of African American education in St. Louis?

The Colored Citizens' Council is another group that warrants additional study. Similar to the men of the St. Louis Board of Education for Free Colored Schools, the men of the Colored Citizens' Council were all named so that additional research could be done on each of them. One of the most prominent members, George Stevens, pastor of Central Baptist Church, would make a great study in an effort to understand the African American church's involvement in

education. Starting with ministers like Reverend Meacham, a historical analysis could be created that included M. Morrison Clark, George Stevens, and other religious leaders who worked toward educational equity.

A final area of interest for which little information was found during this study is the role of women in educational equity. Women were rarely mentioned as active members of the councils except towards the early 1920s, and the women were usually wives of the council members or school teachers. A more thorough examination of educational advocacy focused solely on women's involvement in the movement would most likely garner a rich narrative that includes organizations such as the YWCA and women such as Annie Malone and Julia Davis. These are stories that are yet to be told and deserve to be added to the predominately male narrative that is presented in this study.

The narratives of the African American citizens' councils presented in this study are not an end, but a beginning to the important role St. Louis has played in the history of African American education starting in the early 1800s and continuing to this day. Often overlooked because of its Midwestern geography and divided alliances in the Civil War, St. Louis is a city that deserves more study, specifically more study of the African American community and its role in advocating for equal opportunities not only in education, but in politics, healthcare, and business. As long as St. Louis continues to ignore the racial realities created by a history founded upon White superiority and African American inferiority, there will continue to be a need for citizens' councils to advocate for equality.

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