



5-6-1959

Statement on Behalf of the School Board Supporting Construction of the New High Schools Without Delay

Lewis F. Powell, Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/powellspeeches>



Part of the [Education Economics Commons](#), [Secondary Education Commons](#), and the [Urban Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lewis F. Powell Jr. Papers, Box 112/Folder 18

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Lewis F. Powell Jr. Papers at Washington and Lee University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Powell Speeches by an authorized administrator of Washington and Lee University School of Law Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact christensena@wlu.edu.

24/119

5/6/59

My Speech File

L7P

Statement on Behalf of the School Board
Supporting Construction of the New
High Schools Without Delay

Mr. Mayor and Members of Council:

The School Board believes that the public interest requires that the proposed new high schools be built without delay. In view of the importance of the question, it seems desirable that the reasons for this view should be stated frankly and fully. During recent weeks these reasons have been reviewed and discussed with Council informally, and various alternatives have also been carefully explored. It is now desirable, as Council wisely decided, to consider the entire situation in this public hearing.

Part of a Long Range Program

Let us first review briefly the history of this proposal. Richmond has been engaged in a major school building program since 1946. In the intervening 14 years we have built completely new or made major additions to some 28 schools. All of these have been elementary schools except for the Armstrong High School built in 1952. This building program has not been a haphazard one. For the most part, it has been accomplished pursuant to a long range plan which has contemplated at about this time

two new combined junior-senior high schools for white pupils, one on the Northside and the other on the Southside.

These two new schools (usually referred to as high schools) were first proposed by the Harland-Bartholomew Report and approved by the City Planning Commission in 1945. Their need was reaffirmed by the Segoe Study of 1951; by a more recent special study committee of the State Board of Education; by the City Planning Commission; and last year they were approved by the City Council and the necessary funds appropriated. This action by Council was, however, subject to a final review this spring in light of possible developments relating to the integration crisis in Virginia.

We think Council was justified in reserving this right of final review, as a good deal has happened in recent months and weeks which at least defines more sharply the choices which are available.

The Fundamental Question

In any event, in view of the history of our building plans and program, it is believed that all will agree (i) that the new high schools were planned to meet Richmond's needs long before the integration problem arose, and (ii) that the schools are in fact needed now unless the existence of the integration problem eliminates or materially alters such need.

This brings us to the fundamental question of whether general public education will continue in Richmond. This is essentially the same question which several other Virginia communities have already faced and which recently received the most careful consideration by the Governor, the Perrow Commission and the Special Session of the General Assembly.

As all of these have recognized, the question is no longer whether there will be integration in Virginia. There is in fact already some integration in Virginia, and under the rules of law established by the courts there will continue to be some integration -- unless public education is abandoned. This is an unwelcome situation to a large majority of our people, but the time has come to put aside wishful and emotional thinking and face realities.

The simple truth is that the ultimate choice here in Richmond (as it has been and will be in other communities in Virginia) is between some integration or the abandonment of our public school education. There is, of course, the element of timing and although litigation is pending, no attempt is being made in these remarks to suggest the outcome or course of any particular litigation. I am speaking to-night broadly about Richmond's choice for the long range future. But we must face this choice at this time as it obviously relates to the decision on the new schools.

Public Education Cannot be Abandoned

It is perhaps not surprising that the School Board, unanimously and with deep conviction, believes that public education in the City of Richmond must be continued. Indeed, as stated in the Board's recent budget message to Council, we feel that our public school system -- as fine as it is at present -- not only must be continued but also we must strive constantly to improve its over-all quality and effectiveness. There has never been a time in the history of our state and nation when education was more essential.

I do not want to trespass on the time of Council by arguing the obvious, as surely the great majority of our people recognize the necessity of continuing public education. I am confident that this is the view of the members of this Council. But there are some -- through understandable resentment at an unwelcome social change forced upon us by law -- who have expressed a willingness to abandon public education rather than suffer any integration.

To those of our citizens who entertain this view, I urge them to reflect on Norfolk's brief but tragic experience, and then to visualize the catastrophic effect upon a great city of no general education for a period of years. This would be measured in terms of (i) increased juvenile delinquency and crime, (ii) deterioration in the

productivity of the people and in the economic health of the community, (iii) a probable rise in the tax burden of those called upon to carry the increased economic load that would inevitably result from widespread illiteracy and diminishing productivity, (iv) a diluted capacity of our citizens to exercise intelligently the franchise of voting, and (v) indeed, a warping and corrosive effect upon the personality, aspirations and opportunity of each individual child in our community.

In brief, the consequences of abandoning public school education (which would mean no effective education for thousands of children) would be intolerable. However bitterly many of our people resent integration (and I do not underestimate the depth of this feeling), we on the School Board are confident that when they understand the only alternatives which in the near future will actually be available to us, an overwhelming majority will then insist that public schools be continued.

We believe, therefore, that the School Board and Council must move forward with long range plans to provide this education, and these two new high schools are the cornerstone of such plans.

Private Schools Are Not an Alternative

At this point it may be well to mention the place of private schools. Under the "freedom of choice" policy recently enacted into law by the General Assembly, it is

properly contemplated that no child will be forced to attend a mixed school. This policy, implemented by a system of scholarship grants, will undoubtedly result in an increase in private school education.

There are some who suggest that private schools will largely supplant public schools. While this may be true in certain of our counties and smaller communities, the inescapable truth is that this is not feasible for Richmond.

The public school system of this city is a major and complex enterprise. Our physical plant alone is valued at \$40,035,000, and as Council knows the operating budget proposed for next year is \$11,700,000. The system includes some 60 separate schools; we have nearly 1500 teachers; and this year's enrollment includes more than 39,000 pupils. Bona fide private schools simply cannot replace this extensive educational system -- in whole or even in major part.

The present private schools are already overcrowded. There will no doubt be some new private schools, but these -- even if they survive the financial and operational hazards characteristic of such schools -- will serve (with varying degrees of adequacy) only a small fraction of our expanding school population. And the children so served will largely come from the upper economic brackets, leaving the great masses of middle and lower income families of both races still dependent

entirely on free public education.

There is another reason why it is hoped and believed that no concerted effort will be made to supplant public with private education. If this should be accomplished to a major extent (through the widespread use of surplus sales and scholarship grants), many constitutional lawyers feel that the resulting private school system would in fact be deemed public in nature and would inevitably go down before the federal courts.

The New Schools Will Lessen
the Integration Problem

I come now to another point which may not be fully understood. The new schools will actually ameliorate the integration problem. They will certainly not aggravate or magnify it.

We foresee no substantial integration in the elementary schools in Richmond. There are, indeed, sound reasons to believe that a majority of the elementary schools will have no more than a negligible percentage of integration for many years. This is true because there are sufficient elementary schools, of equal quality and properly distributed geographically, to serve adequately the children of both races. The situation is, however, quite different with respect to the junior and senior high schools. In view of the rapidly rising Negro population, we must provide promptly additional facilities at this level. Indeed, there could be problems of serious proportions

at John Marshall and certain of our junior high schools unless the two new schools are built.

It is not suggested that the availability of the new schools would in itself prevent some integration at the secondary level in Richmond. The extent to which this occurs will depend upon various unpredictable factors, such as the leadership in both races, the attitudes and restraint of our people, the extent and results of litigation, and the shifts of population. But however these factors may develop, it is the considered opinion of the Board that the new schools would appreciably improve both the short and long range prospect for minimizing the impact of integration.

The Unfortunate Consequences of Further Delay

There are some who have said to the Board: "We agree generally with all that you say, but why the rush -- why not wait at least another year and see what happens?"

When difficult decisions are confronted, there is always a natural temptation to delay making them. The Board is not above temptation of this sort, and so we too have given this possibility our most serious consideration. We had concluded, however, even before the enactment of the new Virginia laws, that there is nothing to be gained from delay and there is probably a good deal to be lost.

It should be remembered that one of the great needs for these buildings at this time grows out of the

increase in enrollment among Negro pupils. If these schools are not built we cannot release existing buildings to house this rapidly increasing Negro school population. We would then have to build other buildings to meet this need which is already upon us. Indeed, the conversion of Chandler and Bainbridge to the use of Negro pupils after the completion of the new high schools may not completely solve the need for high school facilities in these areas.

A further reason for proceeding with our plans immediately is that this lack of facilities for Negro pupils may well accelerate the pressure for integration -- a pressure which would be most seriously felt at John Marshall, Chandler, and Bainbridge because of the increasing number of Negro residents in these areas.

Moreover, if the new schools are substantially delayed, high school boundary lines will probably have to be changed, primarily affecting white pupils on the Northside, the Southside, and the central part of the city. In fact, Thomas Jefferson and Albert H. Hill will be so crowded that some temporary solution must be found if boundary lines are not to be changed for the coming school year. Such changes would disturb long established family and community patterns.

There is also the obvious desirability of clarifying existing doubt and uncertainty as to the

future of public education in Richmond. Not only the public but also the teachers and employees of the school system should be assured that public education will be continued in our city -- although every proper effort will be made to minimize the extent and effect of integration when it comes. A decision by Council to proceed with the long established plans for the new schools will do much to clarify the situation, and may well prevent some of the difficulties which have beset other communities.

Conclusion

And now a few words in conclusion: The School Board and the Administration recognize that the construction of these buildings will certainly not solve the basic problem, and any decision made at this time which tries to anticipate future developments necessarily carries with it some calculated element of risk. We have, however, given the various possible courses of action the most careful study, and it is our best judgment that proceeding promptly with the construction of these schools involves the least risk of serious damage to our community.

It may also be appropriate to express the following general thoughts about our situation in Richmond. Virginia has now faced the integration problem for 5 years. Several communities have had extremely difficult experiences,

with children out of schools and resulting discord and disruption. We have had the good fortune, up to this time, of avoiding closed schools and bitter controversy. Richmond is a conservative and mature city. It has enjoyed a long and cherished tradition of restraint and respect for individual rights as well as established customs and institutions. We also value education, and have a public school system the excellence of which has attracted national recognition. In short, we live in an unusual city, and one of which we are justly proud.

We are now faced with a period of trial and adjustment - potentially more difficult than any comparable period within living memory. There is nevertheless reason to believe that we have here the requisite leadership, judgment and sense of history to solve the problems of this period in a manner in which both present and future generations will not be ashamed. At least, those of us in positions of responsibility have an obligation to seek such solutions.

Lewis F. Powell, Jr., Chairman
Richmond Public School Board

May 6, 1959