

**School Desegregation: Participant Perceptions of a Freedom of Choice Initiative  
in the South**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama  
August 1, 2015

Freedom of Choice and school desegregation

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## Abstract

This study investigated one school system's implementation of a *Freedom of Choice* plan to desegregate its public schools prior to being mandated to do so. The research examined the process to implement a *Freedom of Choice* plan, the advocates and positive aspects of *Freedom of Choice*, as well as the hindrances and negative aspects of a *Freedom of Choice* plan. This historical case study allows the story of public school desegregation to be told from the perspective of nine participants who were actively involved as either a student, a teacher, or as an administrator in a *Freedom of Choice* initiative during the 1960's in one southern town.

Previous research captures the resistance, and often times violent reactions, of many communities from the southern United States as efforts were made to desegregate public schools. This study sought to provide significant information to the body of work related to public school integration and to outline efforts made in one community to desegregate schools with little controversy.

The findings of this research indicated that a *Freedom of Choice* plan was successfully implemented in the community of this study. While some negativity surrounding the *Freedom of Choice* implementation did exist, the overall effort was successfully facilitated by strong leadership, collaboration, and community support. The research allows for a previously untold story to be recorded. This story provided implications for future practice and recommendations for further research.

## Acknowledgments

To those who have experienced the battles of inequity and paved the way for Civil Rights, I extend my heartfelt expressions of respect and gratitude for their contributions to making our world a better place. Many goals are not yet reached and much more must be accomplished...but to the many people who have sacrificed their time, talent, resources, and selves to make society better, I offer my acknowledgement and applause. I am thankful to have met Anthony Lee and Willie Wyatt. I am grateful for the opportunity to have heard Maya Angelou and James Owens. Attending a ceremony at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church made a lasting impact and conversations with two of the Freedom Riders made a difference in who I am.

To Frances Kochan, I give most sincere thanks for unwavering guidance and support throughout my long and difficult dissertation journey. Without her continued faith and encouragement, I could not have accomplished this goal. Words of thanks will be far less than the acknowledgement and gratitude she deserves for walking through life with me.

To Cara and to Cate, may you forever know the love I have for each of you. As a family we have reached this point. With sweet grace you have supported my dreams. You are my reasons to succeed.

To my mom, you are the wind beneath my wings. It is with much appreciation and a love like none other that I dedicate this work to you.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* 347 U.S. 483 (1954) was considered a landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court. In this decision, the justices declared state laws establishing separate but equal public schools for White and Black students as unconstitutional. This Court decision overturned a previous case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which allowed state-sponsored school segregation. The unanimous Supreme Court decision read on May 17, 1954, by Chief Justice Earl Warren stated that racial segregation violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Many sources state that this Court decision paved the way for the Civil Rights movement but not without much resistance across the country (Chambers, 2010; Cope, 2011; Smith, 2005). The original interpretations of the Court decision were considered ambiguous and opened the opportunity for varied reactions throughout the United States (Smith & Kozleski, 2005). In some settings, the *Brown* backlash mobilized efforts of White segregationists to oppose Blacks' efforts for equality. Many believe that the *Brown* court's fundamental failure to articulate an affirmative standard for public education's post segregationist future was a huge mistake with a tremendous negative impact that opened the door for decades of evasion (Smith & Kozleski, 2005). While the ambiguity was rectified by the passage *Brown II* in May 1955, a great deal of damage was done between the first and second iteration of *Brown*.

Examples of the type of difficulties which ensued include the integration efforts at Central High School of Little Rock, Arkansas, in which major problems occurred, bringing national attention to the situation. Cope (2011) writes that, in Little Rock, there seemed to be a large disconnect between the district's efforts and the approach used to integrate the school. Faculty members spoke of receiving no professional development or formal preparation for the integration efforts. In fact, teachers were only notified of the Black children enrolling in their classes four days prior to the students' arrival. The public speeches that were made by district level officials were by way of explanation, not preparation. According to the teachers, at no time were considerations made to define, discuss, or study the possible consequences of desegregation. Teachers were not encouraged to offer suggestions toward the plan of integrating Central-Little Rock. The integration of Central High School was further complicated by the call for federal troops to escort the nine Black students accepted to attend the school amidst massive protest and demonstration in 1957 (Rains, 1997).

Another example of resistance to the *Brown* decision was the action of the citizens of Prince Edward County, Virginia. The ultimate defiant step taken by this school system was to close all public schools entirely for five years to avoid compliance with the desegregation of schools (Smith, 2005). Virginia's compulsory attendance law was repealed in 1959 and replaced with legislation that allowed local cities and counties in Virginia the option to fund public schools or close them to avoid integration (Smith, 2005). Prince Edward County opted to close public schools and create segregated private academies for White students.

Governor George C. Wallace of Alabama is noted on multiple occasions for promoting segregation of schools many years after the *Brown* decision. On September 29, 1963, Governor Wallace ordered the militia to block the integration of Tuskegee High School in Tuskegee, Alabama. The school was desegregated that day and was re-segregated the very next day. The majority of White parents withdrew their children leaving only a small number of Black students at the school (Chambers, 2010).

Governor Wallace is also responsible for trying to prevent African-American students from enrolling at the University of Alabama. His well-known statement as he stood on the steps of Foster Auditorium on the campus, “segregation then, segregation now, and segregation forever,” lives on in history (Chambers, 2010).

While there are many negative stories that have embedded themselves in our minds regarding this historical period, there are also positive actions that took place at this time that may have been left unreported and unknown except by those involved. There are stories of people who tried to change society in a positive way, stories of schools and communities that sought to come together in peace, and stories of successful integration efforts that took place among people of good will. While we must never minimize or forget the unjust and negative things that happened, to be complete, our histories must report the tales of those who made the effort to comply with the spirit of the law and who served as a bridge within their communities. There are many such stories. This is one of them.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A review of the literature reveals that the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was a pivotal decision

relative to civil rights. This case led to the passage of legislation that mandated the desegregation of public schools. The *Brown* and *Brown II* cases set the tone for school districts across the nation in interpreting requirements of school desegregation. At the time of *Brown*, the practice of separate but equal was pervasive in the South, and school districts sought to justify their education of minority students by saying that all students were receiving an education in their states. However, there were serious differences in the educational facilities, services, and resources offered in Black and White schools. Asa Hillard (1978) discussed the stages of mis-education of certain cultural groups in America, particularly Blacks. Hillard stated,

It must be remembered that the present push for “integrated education” had its roots in the general belief that the education which most White children were getting was a quality education, and that if only Blacks and other cultural groups could be present when this quality education was offered, they would be better off than under segregation. There was special notice to the fact not only was American education both legally segregated and de facto segregated, its physical and teaching resources were inequitably distributed. At the very least it was thought, the resource problem could be remedied by requiring desegregation of schools. (p. 100)

Individual states and individual communities within the states formulated desegregation plans on different timelines and addressed unique problems and issues. Although there are many accounts of tragic and violent reactions to this social change, there are a few recorded accounts of the many schools and school systems throughout the land that not only complied with the law but sought to create change, before and

after the mandate to desegregate came into effect. Sharing these stories will document the events which occurred so we may learn from them as we proceed to deal with the many issues around race, social justice, and the role of public education in a democracy which remain prevalent in society today.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to document the efforts and processes of stakeholders of an Alabama school system who sought to integrate their schools before the mandated legislation to do so was in place. The integration efforts occurred under a voluntary program, *Freedom of Choice*. The objective of this historical case study was to present a descriptive narrative of the events as closely as possible based on an exploration of material, artifacts, and collected evidence, as well as face-to-face interviews. The researcher sought to provide a recorded history of this experience from the perspectives of the educators involved in the process. The research is meant to record a missing part of the history and to honor the work that was done during the first several years of their process. It is also being conducted to record experiences of the participants in order to identify lessons that can be applied to the issues of integration and the blending of cultures in today's society. Finally, the study is being conducted to foster further research on this vital topic.

### **Research Questions**

This study was designed for the researcher to investigate the following questions:

Question 1: What are faculty's, students', and administrators' perceptions of why the *Freedom of Choice* program was begun and how it operated?

Question 2: What do faculty, students, and administrators view as the positive aspects of this experience for themselves, the school system, and the community?

Question 3: What do faculty, students, and administrators view as the negative aspects of this experience for themselves, the school system, and the community?

Question 4: What factors do faculty, students, and administrators perceive as facilitating the success of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative?

Question 5: What factors do faculty, students and administrators perceive as hindering the success of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative?

### **Program and Context**

After an informal referendum on May 25, 1959, in which the citizens of the community overwhelmingly voted to favor a new city school system and a tax increase to support the system, the city council established a new school system on October 3, 1961. Following the September 28, 1962, Board of Education meeting, the segregated county school district, which formerly consisted of nineteen schools – seven schools for White children and twelve schools for Black children – officially became two independent school systems. The school district began operation for the 1962–1963 school year, assuming control of eight schools from the surrounding county, six White school properties and two Black school properties, on October 1, 1962. The new five-member school board immediately began planning for the construction of a high school to alleviate overcrowding, with the community voters approving taxes for that purpose in 1965 (Brown, 1986).

In that same year, the school system began a process of school integration (despite the *Brown* decision declaring segregated public schools unconstitutional in



1954). The first Black students were admitted to the high school in June, 1965, as a part of a two-year voluntary period offering Black families the choice of allowing their students to attend the White school. The district gradually desegregated in the ensuing years reaching full integration by the beginning of the 1970–1971 school year (Board Minutes).

### **Methodological Framework**

A historical case study research approach was used in this study. This design is used when a researcher is seeking an in-depth description uniquely relevant to the experiences and perspectives of individuals within a particular context or framework (Thomas, 2011). The design employed in this case study was emergent. The study focused on the first year of the *Freedom of Choice* effort in a Southern school system in Alabama.

### **Background**

A pilot study was conducted in summer, 2011. A semi-structured interview was scheduled with an identified stakeholder who was a student of the school system in the 1960s and who participated in the *Freedom of Choice* efforts. Ten guiding questions were used to scaffold the eighty minute conversation. The interview was audio recorded and then transcribed; initial findings were summarized and documented. Preliminary findings confirm that although *Brown v. Board of Education* declared a legal end to public school desegregation in 1954, the district did not begin the process until 1965 when the system offered a two-year voluntary school choice option. Based on the feedback from the pilot study, through the review of related literature, and analysis of archival data, the research was slightly amended to include not only perceptions of

students from this era, but also educators and school leaders who served during the *Freedom of Choice* era.

### **Data Collection**

In order to document the desegregation of the southern school district, the researcher designed and conducted a multifaceted investigation. Documents and first person data were collected. Documents of archival sources included items such as school board minutes, court documents, and media sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and educators who had participated in school desegregation. Member checking technique was utilized throughout the interviews to increase credibility and validity of the process. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and given to participants to review, expand, or correct (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

A variety of collection strategies was used in this research study. Strategies included a review of documents and archives, interviews, discussions, and analysis of secondary and existing data. Since multiple data sources were implemented, the researcher triangulated the information collected. A systematic approach to analyzing the data was used. All of the data, archival and oral, were categorized according to major themes. Charmaz (2000) states theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research. The themes emerged from the literature review and the interviews. The researcher identified patterns and relationships among the categories through examination. Details about this analysis are presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 of this study includes the findings of the research.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is limited research on the topic of *Freedom of Choice* endeavors in the South during the 1960s. Additionally, little research documenting the integration efforts of this particular school system could be found. Much of the negative story of integration in the South has been told. This is a community story that has been left untold and a history that has not been recorded. There is a reason to remember and to record the story of the people who worked together to create change in a collaborative manner before they were mandated to do so. Much has been written about de jure segregation which was so prevalent, particularly in the South (Solomon, 1968). Numerous studies and journal articles exist documenting the perceptions of teachers and students who were involved in desegregating public schools in the 1960s and 1970s (Danns, 2008; Smrekar, 2009; Verden, 2005). However, few give details from the perspective of those in the schools. The literature about this particular initiative in this community is non-existent. This study contributed to the knowledge of educational history. It also may be used to identify current or future staff development needs or community programs in the area of racial relations in this community and beyond.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations associated with this study. This study examined only one school district in the southern United States. The focus was limited to a time period between approximately 1965 and 1971, concentrating on the events as they were recalled by a limited number of eligible participants. Stakeholder availability was a limitation since the study was conducted more than forty years after the desegregation efforts took place. Due to the time element, recollections might be somewhat limited

after so many years have passed. Additionally, some of the situations that occurred may carry negative and hurtful memories or may be difficult to share because what was done may not be acceptable in today's view. Thus, participants may choose not to share those experiences. The researcher tried to deal with this by establishing trust, giving respondents time to think and to share, and by conducting more than one interview when the level of sharing seemed to be shallow or the stories difficult to tell. It should also be noted that some important memories may not be accessible due to the fact that some people with relevant information are no longer living or other people simply were not available to participate in this study.

Another limitation of the study was any subjective bias that may have evolved in the interview process. The primary research instrument used to collect data was face-to-face interviews, which allowed for open dialogue. Opinions and feelings of the research participants were collected and analyzed through the lens of a Caucasian female. Some of the participants were African-American. The researcher used standard processes to overcome any bias, including thick descriptions, and sharing findings with another researcher who examined data and verified findings.

A final limitation of this study was that the research was based on the assumption that participants answered the interview questions truthfully. Assuming the responses were truthful, the researcher was also charged with accurately articulating the perceptions gathered from the data collection.

## Definitions

For the purpose of this study, frequently used terms will be defined as follows:

**Brown v. Board of Education** – 347 U.S. 483 (1954), a landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court that declared state laws establishing separate public schools for Black and White students unconstitutional.

**De facto segregation** – discrimination that was *not* segregation by law; received formal approval by way of a standardization process.

**De jure segregation** – racial separation that is required by law.

**Desegregation** – to eliminate any law, provision, or practice requiring isolation of the members of a particular race in separate units.

**Freedom of Choice** – plan devised in many communities allowing Black and White students the choice of which school they would attend in the 1960s; Black students were allowed the option to choose to attend a traditional all-Black school or a traditional all-White school, as well were White students allowed the same choice.

**Freedom Rider** – person who challenged racial laws in the American South in the 1960s, originally by refusing to abide by the laws designating that seating in buses be segregated by race.

**Integration** – incorporation as equals into a society or organization of individuals or different groups.

**Jim Crow Laws** – series of rigid anti-Black laws that created a caste system in which Blacks were treated as second class citizens from approximately 1877 through the mid-1960s (Pilgrim, 2000).

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** – an African-American civil rights organization in the United States, formed in 1909. Its mission is "to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination."

**Plessy v. Ferguson** –163 U.S. 537 (1896), a landmark United States Supreme Court decision in the jurisprudence of the United States, upholding the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of separate but equal.

**Magnet schools** – public schools with specialized courses or curricula. "Magnet" refers to how the schools draw students from across the normal boundaries defined by authorities.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented an overview of the study, statement of the problem, purposes, research questions, methodological framework, significance, and related definitions. The next chapter is an overview of relevant and related literature surrounding public school integration efforts. Chapter 3 describes methods used to conduct the research. Chapter 4 includes the findings from the study. Chapter 5 captures the essence of the findings of the study, implications, and recommendations for future study.

## CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court took a momentous step with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, ruling in which the court set aside a Kansas statute permitting cities of more than 15,000 to maintain separate schools for Blacks and Whites. In this decision, the court ruled that all segregation in public schools is “inherently unequal,” and that all Blacks barred from attending public schools with White pupils are denied equal protection of the law as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

This momentous change was a difficult one, and it was wrought with many challenges. Although this decision in itself did not mandate the desegregation of schools, and it took another action to set that into motion amidst the many challenges, there were communities that did make attempts to lead voluntary integration efforts known as *Freedom of Choice*. While the literature is abundant documenting the struggles and resistance toward school desegregation, little has been written about the *Freedom of Choice* efforts in this country. This research study focused on a *Freedom of Choice* initiative of a small community in eastern Alabama in the 1960s.

The topics outlined in this chapter provide a historical background of school desegregation within the context of the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s. Alabama was a focal point of national attention during the Civil Rights Movement as noted in much of the literature cited within this chapter. In addition to presenting

historical information about school desegregation in Alabama, accounts from other states and from a national perspective are also referenced. Further, the literature provided shares perspectives from participants at the time of the events of school desegregation. The chapter concludes with relevant information pertaining to organizational change and how schools have been impacted by the integration efforts.

### **Relevant Historical Events**

The chronology of events following *Brown* indicate that it was the first significant link in a chain of causation leading to the acceleration of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Patterson (2001, 2005) notes that a number of historians who have studied the Civil Rights movement have identified the *Brown* decision as a catalyst that sparked future legislation and events leading to school desegregation in the United States.

The well-known bus-boycott movement in Montgomery, Alabama, arose only one-and-a-half years after *Brown*. In 1957, President Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to support integration at Central High School. Other scattered events link the *Brown* decision to the Civil Rights movement. On the third anniversary of the *Brown* decision, May 17, 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. staged a prayer pilgrimage in Washington, DC. The first group of Freedom Riders announced they intended to reach their final destination of New Orleans, Louisiana, on May 17, 1961. Although the *Brown* decision was focused on schools, it did not have the effect of mandating school desegregation. However, based on the examples cited, it did appear to create an environment of activism in terms of the Civil Rights movement.



Patterson (2001) states that while initial efforts to desegregate schools were slow, the *Brown* decision was a societal stimulant to civil rights activism. Even in the early 1960s, many White political leaders were slow to embrace the societal change. President John F. Kennedy finally forced Congress to take action in 1963. Patterson (2005) notes Kennedy's cautions. First, he had earned the presidency in 1960 by the smallest of margins, only 49.7% of the popular vote. Second, the President presided over a deeply divided Democratic Party, which relied heavily on the votes of southern Whites. Third, President Kennedy has special safety concerns about desegregation of schools due to the idea of having to send his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, into southern states to press for school desegregation (Patterson, 2005).

When Lyndon Johnson took office in November 1963, almost ten years after the *Brown* decision, fewer than two percent of Black public school children went to schools with Whites in the South (Patterson, 2001). President Johnson was charged with pushing Kennedy's Civil Rights bill through Congress in 1964. By 1968, Johnson realized very little effort was being made to desegregate public schools. He felt school children were suffering from the political tactics being used to withhold federal funds from those school systems which failed to integrate (Patterson, 2001). President Johnson was referring to Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which authorized the federal government to cut federal education money from segregating school districts (Patterson, 2005). Desegregation in the South during the 1950s and early 1960s consisted of court-approved choice plans that took three forms: (1) pupil placement laws that assigned students to schools on the basis of their race and considered requests for transfers on an individual basis, (2) freedom-of-choice plans that required everyone to

choose a school but allowed them to stay at their formerly one-race school if they chose to, and (3) incremental desegregation plans that phased in desegregation by grade and by year. All of these plans were used as delaying tactics to avoid having to implement a truly race neutral assignment policy, including neighborhood schools (Rossell, 1995). President Johnson felt *Freedom of Choice* would be an acceptable tactic for southern school systems. *Freedom of Choice* seemed promising at the time, but ultimately White parents sent their children to White schools, and very few Black parents sent their students to White schools fearing intimidation (Patterson, 2005).

### **Historical Overview of School Segregation and Integration in the United States**

After the abolition of slavery in the United States, three Constitutional amendments were passed to grant newly freed African Americans legal status: the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, the Fourteenth provided citizenship, and the Fifteenth guaranteed the right to vote. In spite of these amendments and Civil Rights acts to enforce the amendments, between 1873 and 1883 the Supreme Court handed down a series of decisions that virtually nullified the work of Congress during Reconstruction. In 1896 the Supreme Court sanctioned legal separation of the races by its ruling in *H.A. Plessy v. J.H. Ferguson*, which held that separate but equal facilities did not violate the U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment (Lovett, 2005).

Monday, May 17, 1954, all nine justices of the United States Supreme Court in Washington joined in a declaration that legally-sanctioned racial segregation in the public schools is a violation of the U.S. Constitution's promise of equal protection of the laws. The decision was unanimous, covering five consolidated cases known collectively as *Brown v. Board of Education* (Egerton, 2009). Egerton (2009) argued that *Brown*

was the most important legal principle to be shaped by the Supreme Court in the twentieth century because it ended for all time an unarticulated presumption that some Americans were more entitled to the legal rights of citizenship than others. Not just students seeking quality and equality in education, but citizens pursuing fair treatment in all walks of life have benefited from the court's interpretation of the U.S. Constitution in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

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

The legal justification of racial separation of students in public schools in the United States is generally considered to have had its inception in the 1896 United States Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In this decision, the Court legalized racial discrimination through its "separate but equal" doctrine (Caldas & Bankston, 2007). The doctrine required that any separate facilities for different races had to be of equal quality (McBride, 2006). Although there were attempts at integrating Blacks and Whites in public schools during the Reconstruction era, at the time of the *Plessy* decision, the White dominated governments of the South had already largely undone any progress made toward integrating freed Blacks into southern society during Reconstruction (Maxwell, 2004). Local and state governments under White-dominated control ensured that Blacks were politically barred from challenging the "separate by equal" decision. The *Plessy* decision made by the Supreme Court in a sense validated and rendered constitutional the social reality already prevalent throughout most of the South: where Blacks and Whites were indeed "separate," not only in schools, but within the entire society in terms of class and life choices (Caldas, 2006).

It was not until the 1930s that the first significant legal fissure in the “separate but equal” doctrine appeared. Caldas and Bankston (2007) outline the case of *Gaines v. Canada* heard by the United States Supreme Court in 1938. This case was a challenge of the Missouri State Supreme Court ruling that upheld a University of Missouri Law School policy of not admitting Black students. At the time there was no “equal” Black institution so the Court ruled Blacks had to be admitted to the all White law school since no “separate” facilities were available. Caldas and Bankston further explain another setback to the doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in the 1950 case heard in the United States Supreme Court, *Sweatt v. Painter*. In *Sweatt*, a Black man sued for admission to the University of Texas Law School since there was no law school for Blacks. The state of Texas established a law school for Blacks and claimed it was substantially equivalent. When the case made its way to the Supreme Court, the ruling was made that the new facility for Blacks was hardly equal. This case set a precedent acknowledging that separate facilities are not necessarily equal (2007).

### ***Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas***

Cozzens (1995) presents a concise summary of the events related to the landmark United States Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the early 1950s near Topeka, Kansas, a Black third grade student named Linda Brown had to walk one mile through a railroad switchyard to get to her Black elementary school. She walked past a White elementary school located only seven blocks away from her house. Her father, Oliver Brown, tried to enroll her in the White elementary school but was refused. Brown went to the Topeka branch of the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People and asked for help to get his daughter enrolled in the school of closer proximity to their home.

A suit was filed and heard in the U.S. District Court from June 25–26, 1951. At the trial, the NAACP argued that segregated schools sent a message to Black children that they were inferior to Whites and thus mandated segregated schools were inherently unequal. The Board of Education's defense was that, because segregation pervaded so many other aspects of life, segregated schools simply prepared Black children for segregation they would face throughout life. The Board also argued that segregated schools were not harmful to Black students as many great African Americans such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and George Washington Carver had attended segregated schools and accomplished much (Cozzens, 1995).

Since no precedent had been set overturning *Plessy*, the court felt compelled to rule in favor of the Board. The decision was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court on October 1, 1951. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, also known as *Brown I*, actually represented four cases which were tried together under the same challenge:

- *Brown v. Board of Education*
- *Briggs v. Elliot*
- *Davis v. County School Board*
- *Gebhart v. Belton*

A fifth case, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, was also heard by the Supreme Court at the same time as *Brown*. This case was first heard in December 1952, and again in December 1953, but the Court failed to reach a decision in either of these instances. When they reached

the *Brown* decision, they also issued a separate opinion on *Bolling v. Sharpe* which was in essence the same as the *Brown* decision.

On May 17, 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education* the Supreme Court ruled “separate but equal” has no place under the Fourteenth Amendment. Chief Justice Earl Warren read the unanimous decision of the Court:

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other tangible factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does...We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold the plaintiffs and other similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. (*Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483, 1954)

Since Black children were forced to attend schools in substandard educational facilities with inadequate resources simply because they were on the wrong side of the color line (Horsford & McKenzie, 2008), many Blacks hoped the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision would afford their children equal access to funding and resources that were readily available in White schools.

Following the Supreme Court’s decision on the *Brown v. Board of Education*, United States Representative John Bell of Mississippi coined the term “Black Monday” on the floor of Congress to denote Monday, May 17, 1954, the date of the Supreme

Court's decision (Chambers, 2010). Caudill (1972) noted in opposition to the Court's decision, White citizens' councils formally organized throughout the South to preserve segregation and defend segregated schools. The White Citizens' Council movement in Mississippi, led by circuit court judge Thomas Brady Pickens, published a handbook entitled *Black Monday*, in which the philosophy of the movement is stated (Caudill, 1972).

After the *Brown* decision, the state of Black education continued to reflect the challenges of racial separation and unequal resources (Horsford & McKenzie, 2008). Resistance among many White communities in the South was strong. Whites employed a strategy of fleeing neighborhoods and communities where schools might become desegregated to avoid the possibility of having Black children attend school with their White children (Wells, 1993). Another resistance tactic was that Southern Whites attempted to convince the nation that Blacks were content living under segregation (Bell, 2004).

The primary Black civil rights organization in the first half of the twentieth century was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which sought desegregation of schools from its inception. In the 1950s, the *Brown* decision held that school segregation was unconstitutional, but the language was unclear about how quickly and in what manner desegregation was to be achieved. Southern Whites generally opposed school desegregation and fought the implementation of *Brown*. Many state officials evaded school desegregation and passed legislation aimed at making school desegregation more cumbersome and difficult than it needed to be

(Daugherty, 2011). Desegregation of public schools was not becoming a reality in the South; therefore the Court had to take additional steps.

### **All Deliberate Speed**

In the fall of 1957, more than three years after the decision in *Brown*, only 684 of the approximately 3,000 biracial school districts in the South had begun to desegregate, and some of those acted on a very slow, "token" basis (Lype, 1992). Resistance to desegregation and dramatic confrontations were displayed across the country (Davis, 2004). Responding to legal and sociological arguments presented by NAACP lawyers, led by Thurgood Marshall, the court stressed that the badge of inferiority stamped on minority children by segregation hindered their full development no matter how equal physical facilities might be. This case acted as a judicial follow-up to *Brown I* and further delegated and delineated the responsibilities for implementation. This case, known as *Brown II*, remanded the lower courts to take such proceedings and enter such orders and decrees consistent with this opinion. School authorities would have the primary responsibility of desegregating their schools. The courts would then determine whether the action of the school authorities constituted good faith implementation of the governing constitutional principles, *Brown v. Board of Education II*, 349, U.S., 294 (1955). After hearing further arguments on implementation, the court declared in 1955 that schools must be desegregated with all deliberate speed (Steele, 2011). This additional ruling is referred to as *Brown II* (Davis, 2004). Davis (2004) also writes "the high promise of *Brown* dimmed in community after community, but its light never totally disappeared" (p. 96). Many people believed racial relations would improve in the absence of legal barriers to school attendance. However, when schools began to open



in the fall, no observable changes in admission policies were noted. Months turned into years of failed action by local and state politicians. In general, desegregation did not occur (Davis, 2004). Faced with increasing public and state legislative support for desegregation, political leaders in Southern states gradually introduced desegregation measures. By 1961, only South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi still maintained completely segregated school systems (Chambers, 2010).

Almost a decade later, the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 to enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes (Public Law 88-352, 1964). The drive for this act was partially fueled by the reaction of states to the desegregation of schools and was considered a culmination of the *Brown* decision. The pace of desegregation increased after the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

### **Resistance to Desegregation**

Even after the passage of *Brown II*, there continued to be extensive resistance to desegregation throughout the South. The states of Virginia and Arkansas offer examples of the types of responses states took to thwart the desegregation of schools. Some of the actions taken in these states and others are described in the sections which follow.

**Resistance in Virginia.** Virginia's public schools had been racially segregated since their inception in 1870. The segregation of schools went beyond issues of Black and White. Members of Virginia's Indian tribes were also largely excluded from public education. Public high school was only available to Indians who were willing to attend Black schools, and most refused (Daughterity, 2011).

There was massive resistance by Whites in Virginia to school desegregation which began almost immediately following the 1954 *Brown* decision (Doyle, 2003). Meanwhile, African Americans, with the assistance of the NAACP, fought to end segregation. Virginians were adamant supporters of states' rights and fought hard to maintain racially discriminatory practices. The desegregation of public schools in Virginia began on February 2, 1959. When desegregation began in the state, Black students who sought to transfer to White schools were forced to go through a complex selection process and the majority of applicants were denied. As late as 1965, fewer than 12,000 of the 235,000 Black students in Virginia went to desegregated schools and this lack of progress continued through the early 1970s (Daughterity, 2011). It took until 1972, through an intra-district busing program, to achieve any real desegregation in the schools. The years between 1954 and 1972 were wrought with many efforts to hinder the progress of school desegregation.

In September 1954, Virginia Governor Thomas B. Stanley appointed a legislative commission referred to as the Gray Commission, named after Senator Garland Gray, to examine possible courses of action to avoid the Court's ruling in *Brown*. The approved plan included items such as tuition grants to aid White students attending private schools, pupil assignments to avoid racial mixing, and amendments to the compulsory

attendance law so that no child would have to attend an integrated school. A state wide referendum was held in 1956, and the plan was approved (Doyle, 2003).

African American citizens were actively trying to desegregate Norfolk's schools during this same time period. In 1956, African American Leola Beckett filed suit against the School Board of Norfolk for rejecting transfer requests for African American students to attend public schools for Whites. In 1957, the federal court ruled the school board could no longer refuse to admit students based on race. The school board continued to deny transfers after the court decision using the rationale of "health and safety concerns, social adaptability, and place of residence", while no direct reference to race was made in the 151 denial of transfers made after the court decision (Doyle, 2003).

In 1958, the school board members of Norfolk decided to admit seventeen secondary students into a White high school. Rather than permitting this to happen, then new Governor James L. Almond closed the schools in Norfolk. In November 1958, a city referendum was proposed to reopen the schools. Families were informed on this referendum that they would have to pay tuition since state funds would not be provided until integration occurred. The referendum failed. Thousands of young people were left to find schooling in alternative forms. The group has been referred to as the "The Lost Class of '59" (Doyle, 2003).

In May of 1959, Prince Edward—a rural county sixty miles southwest of Richmond, Virginia—was ordered to end segregation in its public schools. In June the county's government shut down all schools. The county had thirteen schools for Blacks and eight schools for Whites. The schools were closed by the governing body simply not voting or allocating any funds for their operations. In September the White

community opened private schools for White children only. The 1700 Black students were shut out from public education in the county (Goodman, 1961).

In the fall of 1959, little changed for Prince Edward's White students. The same teachers, whose salaries were paid with private funds, held classes in churches and unrented store space. It would be inaccurate to call the private school system for White children a sham, and equally untrue to call it an unadulterated success. The system was called the Prince Edward School Foundation. It housed just under 2000 students in the make-shift spaces available in the district. Classes were held from 8:30–1:30 each day. The Foundation was led by an administrator, a head master, a librarian, and sixty-three teachers, most of who moved directly from the public to the private schools with the children. All classrooms were made available for use without charge; supplies were donated; books for the media center were taken from an old high school and housed in a former drug store (Goodman, 1961).

The county paid \$35 per year per child for transportation costs. Old school buses were used by a private non-profit company called Patrons Incorporated. The buses were driven by high school students. The cost to attend the Foundation schools was only \$15 per child for the school year. All other expenditures were paid with public tax dollars (Goodman, 1961).

A debate took place in January 1960 utilizing a Virginia law which allowed the sale of surplus items (Goodman, 1961). A group of individuals wanted to sell the old Farmville High School building and use the money for Prince Edward Academy. The six member all-White board voted 4-2 against this practice and killed the idea of the new academy.

Most of the Black students were left to find education in whatever means possible. Some Black students were sent to live with relatives in neighboring communities to go to school. About 200 Black students made their way to a Black high school in North Carolina. Most Black students, estimated to be approximately 1400, remained in the county and attended training centers until the public schools were reopened in 1963 after the NAACP represented the Prince Edward County Blacks who became plaintiffs in *Griffin v. County School Board*. As a result of this case, public schools were forced to reopen at the expense of the taxpayers (Goodman, 1961).

While the resistance in Virginia might be considered extreme, the reactions of people in the state of Arkansas gained more notoriety and have a prominent place in our history books. The highlights of this story are presented in the section that follows.

**Resistance in Arkansas.** Because the events in Little Rock were largely developed in front of television cameras, the resistance to desegregation in Arkansas received much national exposure. With the involvement of state and federal government officials, the National Guard, and media outlets, the events surrounding the integration of the Little Rock, Arkansas, schools have been solidified in the recordings of history.

Just days after the May 17, 1954, *Brown v. Board* decision, the Little Rock School Board issued a statement saying it would comply with the Supreme Court's decision when the Court outlined the method and time in greater detail. One year later in May 1955, the board voted to adopt Superintendent Virgil Blossom's plan of gradual integration starting in September 1957. The plan would allow for integration at the high school and add lower grades over the next six years (Rains, 1997).

In January 1956, twenty-seven Black students attempted to enroll in an all-White Little Rock school (Rains, 1997). They were denied entry, and a suit was filed by the NAACP. The suit was dismissed on the grounds that Little Rock had acted in good faith with the integration plan approved.

In spring 1957, 517 Black students lived in the all-White Central High School district and were eligible to attend. Eighty of these students expressed interest in doing so. Following interviews with the Superintendent, seventeen were selected to attend Central High in the fall. Eight of the seventeen eventually decided to return to the Black high school, Horace Mann High. Organized protests began to form to prevent the integration in September of Central High. On September 2, 1957, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called the National Guard to Central High in an effort to preserve the peace. On September 4, the nine Black students attempted to enter Central High and were turned away by the National Guard. Governor Faubus was accused of sending the guard to prevent integration and not preserve the peace. The National Guard was removed, and the Little Rock Police Department took over on September 23, 1957. The nine Black students were escorted into Central High through a side door as thousands of protesters gathered outside the school. Once the crowd learned the Black students were inside, the crowd became unruly, and the Black students were taken away from the school. Two days later President Eisenhower sent federal troops to the school to maintain order, and the nine Black students returned to Central. The school year was filled with altercations, but the students remained in school (Rains, 1997).

Lawson and Payne (1998) note President Eisenhower's sympathy for the South did not keep him from recognizing authority in the federal government to remedy racial

injustice. He often spoke out for removing barriers to Black suffrage. Eisenhower considered protection from discrimination as constitutionally guaranteed. He further reasoned that once southern Blacks recovered from racial ills, they could peacefully and deliberately progress (Lawson & Payne, 1998).

On September 24, 1957, President Eisenhower addressed the nation on radio and television. This address was an update to the American people on the situation in Little Rock, Arkansas. President Eisenhower stated:

As you know, the Supreme Court of the United States has decided that separate public educational facilities for the races are inherently unequal and therefore compulsory school desegregation laws are unconstitutional. Our personal opinions about the decision have no bearing on the matter of enforcement; the responsibility and authority of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution are very clear. Local Federal Courts were instructed by the Supreme Court to issue such orders and decrees as might be necessary to achieve admission to public schools without regard to race—and with all deliberate speed. (*Brown v. Board of Education II*, 349, U.S., 294, 1955)

Arguments continued throughout the community as to whether Little Rock schools were ready to be integrated. The response to this question was to close public high schools in Little Rock in 1958, leaving nearly 4000 high school students to seek alternative education options. Schools reopened in the fall of 1959 after another year of turmoil, school board resignations, and revised integration plans. It took until 1972 for all grades in Little Rock schools to become integrated (Rains, 1997).

At the time of the 1954 *Brown* decision, laws in seventeen states (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and Missouri) required that elementary schools be segregated. By the end of 1957, nine of the seventeen states had begun integration in their school systems, and five more states had been added to the list by 1961. Resistance to desegregation was prevalent throughout the south, but responses varied in degree and type. The next section of the review attempts to capture the essence of the responses as states moved from segregated to desegregated schools.

### **Movement toward Desegregation**

On May 18, 1954, Greensboro, North Carolina, became the first city in the South to publicly announce it would abide by the *Brown* Supreme Court decision. School Superintendent Benjamin Smith remarked, “It is unthinkable that we would try to override the laws of the United States.” The school board, which had its first African American member appointed in 1951, voted six to one to support the court’s ruling to desegregate its public schools (Hawkins, 2011).

Hawkins (2011) also wrote that Black parents were interested in the overall integration process of the communities’ public schools. They wanted to see their children have access to the same quantity and quality of educational resources as the White children. However, in contrast to many Southern communities, several of Greensboro’s all-Black schools had been considered among the best non-white schools available in the state.



Although the school board voted and voiced support of desegregation in 1954, no integration took place until the 1957–1958 school year. The delay was related to the endorsement of North Carolina’s Pearsall Plan. This plan was introduced in 1956 in the State House and shifted responsibility from state to local board control with regard to acting on the *Brown* decision. This plan required African American families to apply for admission to all-White schools (Hawkins, 2011).

In 1957, six African American students integrated previously all-White schools in Greensboro. Integration occurred rather peacefully compared to that of other Southern states such as Alabama, Arkansas, and Virginia. In 1959, Greensboro still had no more than six Black children enrolled in mixed classes. The rate of integration increased slightly in 1963 spurred on by local protests. While Greensboro was one of the first cities to proclaim it would abide by the law, it was one of the last five cities to fully integrate its public schools. In 1971, Greensboro was placed under the “new attendance plans” of the state which called for busing to eliminate the last of the segregated schools (Hawkins, 2011).

In 1960 desegregation began in Louisiana. A number of Whites protested and boycotted New Orleans public schools initially, but later the protest efforts diminished. In 1961, two Black students registered at the University of Georgia. The students were suspended but later returned under a federal judge’s order. In 1962, violence erupted at the University of Mississippi when James H. Meredith was allowed under court order to register for class. James Meredith was the first Black person to attend a Mississippi public school. Two people were killed as riots erupted when federal marshals escorted Meredith to class (Chambers, 2010).

Like many Southern cities, Nashville moved slowly in response to federal mandate to desegregate its schools as required by *Brown v. Board*. Smrekar (2009) notes the efforts made by the leaders of this city including a look at the magnet school program. For almost thirty years, the school district officials used a variety of measures to avoid a full-scale desegregation. In 1983, the district adopted a court-approved plan that would maintain racial balance in schools throughout the metropolitan area (Smrekar, 2009).

In Alabama, the state in which this study took place, desegregation efforts had a difficult beginning and took a long time to achieve. Much of the difficulty was rooted in the constitution of the state.

### **Segregation and the Climate in Alabama**

A segregated society in the state of Alabama was prevalent and accepted as a norm by many Southerners in the 1950s and 1960s. School desegregation was slow to evolve in Alabama. A series of significant events occurred in the state of Alabama throughout the mid-20th century that truly shaped the culture of the state and prompted much national legislation. In fact, Alabama is cited often in the literature as a state where many notable events took place during the Civil Rights movement: Freedom Riders, Montgomery Bus Boycott, and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing are examples.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a political and social protest campaign that started in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. The campaign lasted from December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks, an African American woman, was arrested for refusing to surrender her seat to a White person, until December 20, 1956, when a federal ruling

declared the Alabama and Montgomery laws requiring segregated buses to be unconstitutional. Under the system of segregation used on Montgomery buses, White people who boarded the bus took seats in the front rows, filling the bus toward the back. Black people who boarded the bus took seats in the back rows, filling the bus toward the front. Eventually, the two sections would meet, and the bus would be full. If other Black people boarded the bus, they were required to stand. If another White person boarded the bus, then everyone in the Black row nearest the front had to get up and stand. The boycott of the buses lasted for 381 days. The boycott resulted in the U.S. Civil Rights movement receiving one of its first victories and gave Martin Luther King Jr. the national attention that made him one of the prime leaders of the cause (Cozzens, 1997).

On May 17, 1961, the Freedom Riders set out for the Deep South to defy Jim Crow laws and call for change. Faced with staggered bus schedules, two groups of Freedom Riders left Atlanta an hour apart with the first to leave at 11:00 A.M. The first bus eased into a station parking lot in Anniston, Alabama, just after 1:00 P.M. A crowd of about fifty people carrying metal pipes, clubs, and chains surrounded the bus. The bus was under siege for almost twenty minutes before Anniston police arrived. The bus looked like it had been in a serious collision. Despite the damage to the bus, no one was arrested, and the police escorted the battered bus to the city limits. A pair of flat tires forced the bus to pull over a short distance outside of Anniston. Vigilantes again swarmed and eventually burned the bus. Many of the riders were left beaten and badly injured. The attackers were opposed to the Freedom Riders' expression for equal rights for Blacks (Gross, 2006).

Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham invited Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to Birmingham, nicknamed "Bombingham" because it was the site of eighteen unsolved bombings in Black neighborhoods over a six-year span and of a vicious mob attack on the Freedom Riders on Mother's Day 1961. In 1963, the city government was undergoing a major change. Voters decided to rid the city of the three-man city commission and instead elect a mayor, mostly to force Bull Connor, commissioner of public safety and the man largely responsible for the attack on the Freedom Riders, to step down. Connor ran for mayor, but the voters elected the more moderate Albert Boutwell instead. The Birmingham City Commission, however, refused to step down, leaving Birmingham with two city governments until the courts decided which was the legitimate one. On May 2, a group of Black children, ranging in age from six to eighteen, gathered in Kelly Ingram Park, across the street from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Around 1:00 P.M., fifty teenagers left the church and headed for downtown, singing "We Shall Overcome." They were arrested and placed in police vans. Another group left the church and were also put in a van followed by many other groups throughout the entire afternoon. Soon the police began stuffing the protesters in school buses because there were no more vans. Three hours later, there were 959 children in jail; the jails were absolutely packed. The next day, over a thousand more children stayed out of school and went to Kelly Ingram Park. Bull Connor was determined not to let them get downtown, but he had no space left in his jails. He brought firefighters out and ordered them to turn hoses on the children. Most ran away, but one group refused to budge. The firefighters turned even more powerful hoses on them, hoses that shot streams of water strong enough to break bones. The

force of the water rolled the protesters down the street. In addition, Connor had mobilized K-9 forces to attack protesters trying to enter the church. Pictures of the confrontation between the children and the police shocked the nation. The entire country was watching Birmingham. The demonstrations escalated. Because the jails were filled, the police did not know what to do. Finally, the Birmingham business community, fearing damage to downtown stores, agreed to integrate lunch counters and hire more Blacks, over the objections of city officials (Cozzens, 1997).

Additional national attention was brought to Alabama on June 11, 1963, when Governor George C. Wallace stood at the door of Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama in a symbolic attempt to block two Black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, from enrolling at the school. The drama of the nation's division over desegregation came sharply into focus that June day. During his campaign for governor, Wallace talked of physically putting himself between the schoolhouse door and any attempt to integrate Alabama's all-White public schools. Therefore, when a federal judge ordered Malone and Hood to be admitted to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa that summer, Wallace had the perfect opportunity to fulfill his pledge. Eventually, Wallace did step aside. This event led President Kennedy to align himself solidly with the Civil Rights movement on that very evening (Elliott, 2003).

In 1965, Martin Luther King joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Dallas County Voters League, and other local African American activists in a voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, where in spite of repeated registration attempts by local Blacks, only two percent were on the voting rolls. The campaign in Selma and nearby Marion, Alabama, progressed with mass arrests but little

violence for the first month. That changed in February, however, when police attacks against nonviolent demonstrators increased. On the night of February 18, Alabama state troopers joined local police in breaking up an evening march in Marion. In the ensuing melee, a state trooper shot Jimmie Lee Jackson, a twenty six year old church deacon from Marion, as he attempted to protect his mother from the trooper's nightstick. Jackson died eight days later in a Selma hospital. In response to Jackson's death, activists in Selma and Marion set out on March 7 to march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. On March 7, 1965, some 600 civil rights marchers headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80. They got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas and drove them back into Selma. Two days later on March 9, Martin Luther King, Jr., led a symbolic march to the bridge. Then civil rights leaders sought court protection for a third, full-scale march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. ruled in favor of the demonstrators. On March 21, about 3,200 marchers set out for Montgomery, walking twelve miles a day and sleeping in fields. By the time they reached the capitol on Thursday, March 25, they were 25,000-strong (Garrow, 1978).

As the Civil Rights movement began to take shape across the country, Alabama was much slower to adapt to the societal changes than some other places as documented in these violent events. This, in many ways, became the place where those in the Civil Rights movement gained their impetus and strength to push forward. Communities which were able to begin the desegregation of their public schools were an exception to the norm in the South.

## **Movement toward Desegregation in Alabama**

As noted previously, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* legally ended segregation of public schools in the United States of America in 1954. That was the official stance, but for the majority of schools in the South, desegregation occurred only on paper. Many counties of Alabama did not truly desegregate until the school year of 1969–1970 (Walden & Cleveland, 1971). The slow pace of school desegregation can initially be explained by the 1955 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education II*. In *Brown II* the Supreme Court ruled that Black children need not be immediately admitted to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis, but that individual local school boards should eliminate segregation “with all deliberate speed.” In Alabama and the Deep South, local school boards capitalized on the loose language and interpretation of “deliberate speed.” The ‘wiggle room’ of the less celebrated 1955 version of *Brown* bought most counties in Alabama at least another eight years of racially homogenous education. The doctrine of *Brown II*’s “with all deliberate speed” had essentially been that of a gradual approach characterized by plans that leisurely installed what is referred to as token integration in public schools (Nevin & Bills 1976).

Macon County, Alabama was no exception to this slow pace of change. Nearly ten years after *Brown*, schools in Tuskegee, Alabama, continued segregated practices (Lee v. Macon County Bd. of Educ., 267 F. Supp 458,470-M.D. Ala 1967). Anthony T. Lee filed a complaint with Federal Court against the Macon County Board of Education in 1963 in an effort to end desegregation of schools in Tuskegee, Alabama, and Macon County (AL). On July 16, 1963, the United States was added as Plaintiff based on the merit of the complaint. Federal Justice Frank Johnson ordered Macon County Schools

to desegregate on August 13, 1963. The board was to achieve said desegregation through the use of the Pupil Placement Act, which in this instance would function like a freedom of choice plan. In such a plan, the students had the right to choose the school they wished to attend within the district. This ruling was met with massive resistance in the White community. Governor George C. Wallace responded publicly to the ruling and defiantly opposed the integration decree (*Lee v. Macon County Bd. of Educ.*, 267 F. Supp 458,470-M.D. Ala 1967).

On September 29, 1963, Governor Wallace ordered the militia to block the integration of Tuskegee High School. The school was desegregated that day and was re-segregated the very next day. The majority of White parents withdrew their children leaving only a small number of Black students at the school (Chambers, 2010).

With the use of the tuition grant law, a state measure enacted to cover such school desegregation emergencies, approximately 100 of the boycotting students enrolled in a hastily organized school called the Macon Academy, and thus Alabama's first segregation academy was born. The tuition grant law was a backhanded maneuver by Wallace and some members of Alabama's legislature to use public funds to subsidize the academy movement. *Lee v. Macon* ultimately led to a ruling that found the use of public funds for private schools to be illegal. The state-sponsored campaign for segregation academies, however, did not stop.

Ironically, Wallace's defiance of *Lee v. Macon* in 1963 and unconstitutional use of state dollars to avoid school desegregation along with direct interference in local school board matters in Tuskegee prompted the beginning of the end of racial segregation in public education in Alabama. Fred Gray, the lead attorney for Anthony Lee, argued that



Wallace's interference in state affairs violated *Brown II* because he took the power away from local school boards in meeting the 'with all deliberate speed' guidelines. Gray and the NAACP contended the governor asserted a general control and supervision over all public schools of the state, thereby entitling the court to bring forth a single desegregation order directing state officials to carry out the complete reorganization of the public school system on a non-racial basis (Jenkins, 1968). This appeal by Gray and the lawyers of the NAACP was unprecedented in the Deep South. Up to this point, individual cases from each county and school district had to be filed to achieve school desegregation

On February 3, 1964, an amended complaint was filed including the Alabama State Superintendent and the State Board of Education as defendants. The amended complaint expanded the focus from Macon County to include statewide issues regarding desegregation. The new complaint alleged a dual school system throughout the state of Alabama. Filed as *Lee v. Macon* in 1967 in what began as a case involving Tuskegee and Macon County, this lawsuit eventually led to the first statewide court order to desegregate public schools in the United States. By March of 1967, Judge Frank Johnson had seen enough to know and prove that state officials were controlling public schools in the state. He moved to expand *Lee* to include those officials and every school system in the state not already under court order. On March 22, he ordered the governor and education officials in the state to take affirmative action to disestablish all state enforced or encouraged public school segregation. In his twenty eight page opinion, Johnson pointed out the public defiance of state officials, notably former state superintendent Austin Meadows and George Wallace, and their attempts to flout every

effort to make the Fourteenth Amendment a meaningful reality to Black school children in Alabama. Johnson noted that these state officials had used influence over local school boards to perpetuate the dual school system and had been encouraging the systems not to desegregate unless under court order. He consequently included the ninety six school districts not already under order in his ruling. He also reminded the State of Alabama and the defendant state officials that they were under “an affirmative constitutional duty to take whatever corrective action is necessary” to disestablish the dual school system in the state (Lee v. Macon County Bd. of Educ., 267 F. Supp 458,470-M.D. Ala 1967) (Bagley, 2007).

### **Freedom of Choice**

In the spring of 1967 came U. S. District Judge Frank Johnson’s ruling in Alabama on *Lee v. Macon* and the statewide appeal for school desegregation. The unprecedented, sweeping statewide desegregation order covered all of the state’s 118 school districts and placed the burden of school consolidation on the new state superintendent of education, Ernest Stone, as opposed to local school boards (Jenkins, 1968). School districts that were not in compliance would not receive federal funding allocated to the state. For less than two years, White leadership in Alabama and the clever legal mind of George Wallace maximized what little “wobble room” existed in a paragraph tucked away in the decision that read:

The measure of a freedom of choice plan – or, for that matter, any school plan designed to eliminate discrimination based on race – is whether it is effective. If the plan does not work, then this court, as well as the state of Alabama school officials, is under a constitutional obligation to find some other method to insure

that the dual school system of public education is eliminated (Jenkins, 1968, p. 34).

*Freedom of Choice* was truly the last hope for Whites refusing to attend school with Blacks in Alabama. The plan proved to be a failure due to the unwillingness of virtually any White family to move to a predominately Black school system. Following the Supreme Court rulings in *Green v County* (1968) and *Alexander v. Holmes* (1969), which ultimately enforced the *Brown* decisions of the 1950s once and for all and ended *de jure* dual school systems, local Alabama school boards and governments could no longer fight individual battles against *Lee v. Macon* (1963, 1967). The ruling further enraged Wallace and bolstered his push away from public schools and into segregation academies.

By 1970, all school districts in the state had desegregated the formerly all-White and Black schools and, surprisingly, the process proceeded with relatively few problems. This marked the end of a critical period because by 1970 all segregation academies that would be formed were already in motion even if they lacked educational necessities like books, qualified teachers, sound facilities and adequate tuition revenue (Walden & Cleveland, 1972).

In the end, the fiery years of the Civil Rights Movement brought White and Black communities in the state to a critical evaluation period. Unlike other decisions of the day the White leadership on local school boards had encountered, this one did not appear to allow for creative skirting of the law. Fear and uncertainty of the cultural changes that would come with school desegregation were pervasive in both White and

Black communities across Alabama. Indeed, the White-supremacy provisions buried throughout Alabama's arcane 1901 constitution had largely been expended.

The significant negative attention brought to the South, and particularly Alabama, regarding a segregated society further reinforces how rare a special case is in which *Freedom of Choice* plans worked to fulfill its intended promise of an organizational change.

### **Alabama State College Laboratory High School**

Although the "separate but equal" schooling that Blacks encountered was often not of the highest quality, there were exceptions. From 1920 to 1969, Alabama State College in Montgomery, Alabama, housed a successful Black high school on its campus. Alabama State College implemented a liberal arts philosophy and progressive teaching methods in the school modeling John Dewey's University of Chicago Laboratory School. By 1929, the Alabama State Lab School had gained accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) becoming the only accredited senior high for African Americans in the area. The experiences of the students attending the all Black segregated school were generally calm and satisfying. The Lab School in Montgomery, Alabama, thrived in a time of chaos (Pierson, 2010).

Helen Smith from the class of 1952 recalled, "We were very sheltered...there was an awfulness of the White supremacist culture, but within the Lab School we were not subjected to the negatives" (Pierson, 2010, p. 189). The society was changing, but the students of the Lab School remained focused on the content and their academic experience. The students had no desire to attend the White school. Students were aware of the inequities between the local Black schools and White schools. They were

very content with their Black school and had no desire to allow the Jim Crow laws to define them (Pierson, 2010).

The Lab School was thought of as having a “private school” feel. Students recognized being a student at the Lab School was a privilege. Every student was expected to continue education beyond high school. According to a 1952 SACS study, 100% of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade class continued their education beyond high school (Pierson, 2010).

Another interesting facet Pierson (2010) noted was the description of how class time was spent. Teacher A.C. Henry said, “I did not use class time to discuss changes in society. I got right to teaching physics” (p. 195). A student recalled, “Daily lessons were not about what was lived every day, we talked about that stuff at home, at church, or at club meetings” (p. 195). The Lab School was disbanded by Alabama State College when it became Alabama State University in 1969.

### **Perspectives of School Personnel**

Desegregating schools, a difficult endeavor, has often been written about in terms of what happened in varied states and in the nation as a whole. Much of what has been written has been of a historical nature; some has been written by the students who experienced this first hand. However, there appears to be very little written about the perceptions of teachers, staff, and administrators who were in schools at the time of desegregation.

In Cope’s (2011) further study of integration efforts, he referenced the perspective of teachers within the Little Rock, Arkansas, public schools in 1957. A unique perspective was gathered from interviews with teachers and a review of

personal journals and memoirs. This study was a follow up to efforts published by Anderson (2004) outlining a comprehensive review of school discipline and administrative responses to race-based issues during the integration process. Anderson did not include in her study an explanation nor evidence that “most teachers acted professionally in a tense situation” (Cope, 2011).

According to Cope (2011), assistant principal Elizabeth Huckaby stated, “As public school teachers and administrators, we felt as though education was our major responsibility and integration was a secondary problem in the social revolution of our times.” Central High School’s educators were constrained from speaking freely about the integration efforts. Every effort was made by the administration to keep the problem of desegregation from reaching open discussion. Faculty members told of being intimidated to the point of not ever openly discussing desegregation or befriending the Black students. They felt if they revealed a stance on the issue, they might undermine professional effectiveness and jeopardize collegiality. Teachers at the school were afraid to talk because they did not know to whom they were speaking, nor where their statements might end up being posted (Cope, 2011).

There seemed to be a large disconnect between the district’s efforts and the approach used to integrate the school. Faculty members spoke of receiving no professional development or formal preparation for the integration efforts. In fact, teachers were only notified of the Black children enrolling in their classes four days prior to the students’ arrival. The public speeches that were made by district level officials were by way of explanation, not preparation. According to the teachers, at no time were considerations made to define, discuss, or study the possible consequences of

desegregation. Teachers were not encouraged to offer suggestions toward the plan (Cope, 2011).

Solomon (1968) outlined the perceptions of public educators from Chicago, Illinois, in 1968. The general perceptions indicated that within a racist society the administrators and teachers prefer to reflect the dominant pattern of society in all components of education. It was believed the issue of school integration was one that would not go away, and the educators basically viewed the topic as “the opening stages of a fundamental struggle” (p. 30). With race being a primary topic, school teachers asked the questions, “Is the racial question one primarily external to education? Does it go to the heart of the teaching-learning process and to the core of the role and responsibilities of teachers?” (p. 30). Educators seemed to view segregation as natural (Solomon, 1968).

Also referenced are disputes in the literature relative to the accounts written by White educators, scholars, and policy advocates versus the accounts written by their Black counterparts. Horsford and McKenzie’s (2008) study examined the historical and social context of desegregation for Black students, families, educators, and communities from the standpoint of Black superintendents as they reflected on ‘what they fought for’ and ‘what they had’. Four themes emerged from the interviews relative to desegregation:

- Loss of opportunities for Black educators
- Damaged self-concept of Black students
- Unexpected consequences
- False sense of access, opportunity, and integration

Solomon (1968) further noted the institutionalization of low expectations, commitment, and standards had been embodied in “difficult schools” (p. 29). Historically, these difficult schools were located in ghetto areas. It appears as the school system and community had two standards of education—“good schools” for White children and “difficult schools” for Black children. The pervasive climate in all-White schools was such as to reinforce the notion that Black schools were an alien part of the school system. The Black students were inferior and not worthy of association with White students (Solomon, 1968).

Solomon (1968) wrote in response to the teacher perceptions that this practice in schools would create a false attitude and reinforce segregation as a way of life. Except for a few “honorable exceptions,” the salient attitudes of the professionals geared decisions to the pattern of having resistance to change.

Madsen (2002) conducted an examination of how African American assistant principals in affluent suburban desegregated schools perceived and negotiated intergroup conflict between Black students and White students. He was also seeking to identify the challenges Black administrators faced in leading predominantly White schools. A qualitative study with intensive open-ended interviews was used. Due to the related experiences of all participants, it resulted in a single case study analysis.

Madsen (2002) purposefully selected “desirable” and “affluent” suburban schools located away from inner city schools participating in a system’s desegregation plan for this study. The low number of available Black administrators who met the outlined criteria resulted in four participants for the interviews. Findings from the research indicated there were conflicts between the African American administrators and their



White counterparts. The conflicts were defined in the areas of perception and interaction with teachers. Three themes were identified from the assistant principals' perceptions:

- Problems exist between group boundaries and cultural differences
- A power struggle exists and influences actions with school stakeholders
- A need exists to develop an understanding of "color conscious" leadership.

### **Organizational Change**

Amburgey, Kelly, and Barnett (1993) define an organizational change as policy or cultural shifts made in the overall framework of an institution to move from a current state toward a future state of increased effectiveness. It is a strategy to accomplish a large goal. Usually, organizational change is provoked by a major outside driving force. Such paradigm shifts are often met with strong resistance due to a movement away from traditional or accepted values and norms. Desegregation was such a force, and as noted, it was met with great resistance. Simsek and Louis (1994) wrote organizations are defined by their paradigms or their prevalent view of reality shared by members of the organization. Under a particular dominant paradigm, accomplishments are defined by this prevailing world view. They also note that an organizational paradigm can be defined as a world view, a frame of reference, or a set of assumptions. This view is implicit about the sorts of things that make up the world, how they act, how they respond, and how they are known.

Relative to the racial desegregation of society and the integration of public schools in the South, the definitions provided parallel events outlined in the literature. A segregated society was accepted as the norm in the South. Many people were

resistant to the changes being implemented although the change was designed for the greater good of all people according to the United States Supreme Court and federal government.

Adapting to changing goals and demands has been a timeless challenge (Piderit, 2000). Adapting to integrated schools and a racially integrated society proved to be a similar challenge. Successful organizational adaptation is reliant on generating support and enthusiasm for proposed changes rather than merely overcoming resistance (Piderit, 2000). Support and enthusiasm for desegregating society in the South was extremely rare.

Amburgey, Kelly, and Barnett (1993) suggested that when viewed dynamically, organizational change can be both adaptive and disruptive. Organizational changes are found to have two consequences: the first is an immediate increase in the hazard of organizational failure, and the second is an immediate increase in the likelihood of additional changes of the same type. In both cases, the immediate effect has shown to decline over time. Finally, the effect of change also depends on the timing within the life cycle of the organization.

Further, Tushman and O' Reilly (2013) state that cultural change may be shaped by participation and commitment of the participants. Three key characteristics were identified as critical to evoke organizational change. These were choice, visibility, and irrevocability. Tushman and O' Reilly found that change is more binding when participants have less external pressure to participate, when there is a public perception formed, and participation is not a democratic process.

Utilizing the Amburgey, Kelly, and Barnett definition, a parallel can also be drawn to the public school integration efforts in the South. Many schools and some school systems opted to close as a form of failure. Other events taking place in society during the 1960s and 1970s reinforce public school integration began at a very important timeframe in our history. School desegregation was one piece of very complex societal organizational change. Senior (2002) outlines organizational change as stemming from a combination of at least one of three triggers. These catalysts she identifies were categorized into three environments: political, economic, and socio-cultural. In regard to school desegregation, a focus was placed on a changing political ideology in the 1960s and 1970s that brought about the need for new behaviors.

### **Teachers and Their Role in Organizational Change**

The perspective on teacher change is predicated on the idea that change is a learning process for teachers which is developmental and primarily experientially based (Lortie, 1975). Lortie (1975) further states a key factor in the endurance of any change is demonstrating results. Teacher beliefs and attitudes are derived from classroom experiences (Lortie, 1975). Michael Fullan (2013) confirms the need to understand both the smaller and larger picture from the perspective of a teacher with regard to actions and reactions that occur in the classroom setting. Fullan further emphasizes the need to understand the dynamic of the relationship between the teachers, parents, and administration.

High quality professional development is a central component in nearly every proposal for improving education or educational settings (Guskey, 2002). Professional development programs are a systematic attempt to bring about change focused in one

of three areas: in the classroom, in teacher practices, in beliefs and attitudes (Guskey, 2002). Professional development is based on the notion that teacher commitment to a change either exists or through the planned exercises a commitment can be gained.

Pintrich, Marx, and Boyle (1993) note four motivational constructs relative to conceptual change: goals, values, self-efficacy, and control beliefs. Guskey and Huberman (1995) find teacher change to occur as a series of events from professional development experiences to a change in classroom practices to a change in student performance to a change in attitudes and perception. Fullan (2001) addresses leadership practices as a key component to successful change.

Fullan (2001) notes key components present in those who are able to effectively lead change. One characteristic Fullan describes is moral purpose. Moral purpose is defined as social responsibility to others and to the environment. Fullan (2001) points out moral purpose focuses on making a difference and leads people to solve problems.

Understanding the need for change is also described by Fullan (2001). He notes that having ideas and understanding the change process is not the same thing. Fullan concludes that organizational change has potential to be led but not managed. Additionally he notes change can be and needs to be understood, but not controlled (p. 39).

The single factor most common to successful change within an organization is the improvement of relationships; building relationships with diverse people and groups is a must (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Transforming culture and changing what teachers in the organization value leads to lasting change (Fullan, 2002). Fullan (2001) suggests there is a connection between moral purpose, relationships, and

organizational success. Developing relationships among the people in the organization helps to establish the foundation for communication and achievement of the goal.

### **Cultural Change**

According to Verdun (2005), the dilemma we confront as a society is that while an overwhelming majority of Americans would cringe at the idea of a racially segregated America, our country remains racially segregated. Racial equality is more ideal than real. Even though there is almost no legal segregation in America, de facto segregation persists in varying degrees to the present day. For many Americans, contemporary segregation is exemplified by segregated neighborhoods, segregated churches, and separate schools. There appears to be disconnect between the evils of segregation and the virtues of integration. Verdun (2005) analyzed how America has progressed legally, ideally, and really since the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

Verdun stated American society was not ready for desegregation in 1954. *Brown* was the beginning of a revolution; it took America over twenty years to digest and accept the idea of segregation as being wrong. Arguably, segregation is due to individual and group choices motivated by unconscious racism. The charge as racism was as taboo as the support for segregation according to Verdun. The courts have repeatedly upheld the exercise of individual liberty. Roberts (1995) stated, "Individual liberty takes priority over racial equality in our laws" (p. 70).

When *Brown* ordered the schools desegregated, the national uproar was over the quality of education, with most White people in agreement that integration would lower the quality of education. Many White families made moves from the urban schools to new suburban schools without determining if one school was better than

another. There was no clear mandate in the *Brown* decision compelling the population to act, so most did not. The words “deliberate speed” took several different meanings that yielded a series of lawsuits over the next several years (Verdun, 2005).

Drewry (1955) wrote that educators would find, by broadening their training and experience, greater capacity for dealing with the social realities of American life today. Public school workers must be effective human-relation engineers in carrying out the social policies directed by our society. It was also noted that a variety of means and methods for carrying into effect the requirements of the Court could be expected as local districts were handed the responsibility to implement the Court’s ruling (Drewry, 1955).

### **Social Justice**

Despite conflicting views of social justice, of the sources of injustice in schools and society, and educators’ obligations to committed action, the evidence is clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Ladson-Billings, 1994). When compared to their White middle-class counterparts, students of color and low socio-economic status consistently experience significant lower achievement scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources (Banks, 1997). Coleman (1966) was the first national study to demonstrate that a student’s achievement was more related to characteristics of other students in the school than any other factor of the school. His middle-class peer effect became one of the central arguments for school desegregation by race. Since the Coleman report was first published, it has been widely critiqued. Many education and government officials, as well as some Civil Rights leaders, have come to believe that

integrating schools is less important than providing adequate resources and setting high standards for all students in all schools (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Kain and O'Brien (2000) found that Blacks benefit a great deal from moving to the suburban schools that are more racially mixed. In contrast, Rivkin (2000) found no evidence that exposure to Whites increases academic attainment or earnings for Black men or women in the high school class of 1982, and Cook and Evans (2000) indicate that little of the Black-White difference in National Assessment of Educational Progress scores can be attributed to racial concentration.

In terms of the proportion of Black students in desegregated majority White schools, the South increased dramatically from virtual total segregation in 1960 to 14% of Blacks in majority White schools in 1967, to 36% in 1972, to a high of 44% in 1983 (Orfield, Bachmeier, & Eide, 1997). Orfield, Bachmeier, and Eide (1997) also note Black students living in rural areas, small towns, and suburbs are far more likely to experience school desegregation than those Black students living in larger cities. It is suggested that northern Whites who may be inclined to assume their superiority to southerners in terms of racial attitudes and policies should reflect on the fact that southern students have experienced far more actual desegregation than students in northern states (Orfield, Bachmeier, & Eide, 1997).

Fullan (2013) notes the social reform needed is more than just putting into place new policy; rather it means changing the culture of the classroom, the school, the district. Fullan (2013) further states the critical components of any school are the people and the relationships between the people. Making and growing relationships at

all levels and creating cultures to support trust and innovation are crucial for any social reform to occur (Fullan, 2013).



## CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methods used to collect data to complete this historical case study. It begins by describing the purpose of the study. This is followed by an explanation of the research questions, research design, methodological framework, significance, data collection, and analysis processes. The chapter concludes by presenting issues related to reliability, limitations, and ethical considerations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to document the efforts and processes of a southern school system's efforts to integrate under a voluntary *Freedom of Choice* plan prior to the federal mandate to integrate the schools. The study sought to examine the process from the perspectives of the students, teachers, and administrators involved. It provides a recorded history of their experiences and honors the work that was done. It is hoped that the information gleaned can also be used to help deal with the issues of integration and the blending of cultures in today's society and foster further studies of similar initiatives.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to gain an understanding of the implementation of this effort from the perspective of the students, faculty, and administrators involved. It investigated the following questions:

Question 1: What are faculty, students', and administrators' perceptions of why the *Freedom of Choice* program was begun and how it operated?

Question 2: What do faculty, students, and administrators view as the positive aspects of this experience for themselves, their students, the school system, and the community?

Question 3: What do faculty, students, and administrators view as the negative aspects of this experience for themselves, their students, the school system, and the community?

Question 4: What factors do faculty, students, and administrators perceive as facilitating the success of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative?

Question 5: What factors do faculty, students, and administrators perceive as hindering the success of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative?

### **Research Design**

This research was a historical case study using a qualitative research approach. Gay (2009) states that qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon. "Problems and methods tend to evolve as understanding of the research context and participants deepen" (p. 7).

The central focus of qualitative research is to provide an understanding of a social setting as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. It includes a collection of both visual and narrative data over a period of time in a natural, non-manipulated setting (Gay, 2009). Merriam (2009) outlines a significant general difference between quantitative and qualitative research. Merriam states quantitative

research seeks answers to the “what” questions, while qualitative research seeks answers to the “how” and “why” questions.

A case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied (Stake, 2005). Merriam (1998) explains a case study as a thing, single entity, a unit around which there are no literal boundaries. Miles and Huberman (2002) further describe a case study as an investigation of a phenomenon occurring within a specific context. If the phenomenon to be studied is not identifiable within a specific context, then it is not appropriately studied as a case study.

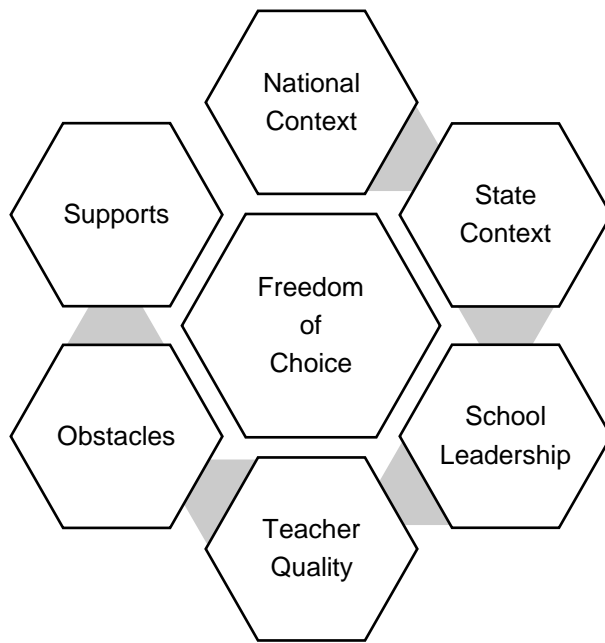
Historical case study research is an approach to conducting research when one is examining a unit or bounded system. It is an all-encompassing approach covering design, data collection, and data analysis (Yin, 2003). The bounded system or unit to be addressed in this study focused on desegregation of a public school system in the South under the *Freedom of Choice*.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Based on the concepts outlined by Peter Senge (2010), the conceptual framework selected for this historical case study evolved from the idea that organizations are a system of interrelationships. In order for an organization to become more successful, the entity must analyze the relationships within the structure to identify problems that exist. Once problems are identified, they can be more adequately addressed. Senge (2010) describes systems thinking as a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline helps us to see how to change systems more effectively, and to act more in tune with the natural processes of the natural world.

The framework employed in this historical case study analyzed the events and issues related to the *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation plan of a particular school system in Alabama. This study involved a two-tiered approach of examining primary source documents from the era and outlining the specific recollections of participants of the *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation era. An attempt was made to identify both supports and obstacles of the endeavor, while also outlining what impact that societal culture had on this movement. National, state, and local events shaped the culture of the community and influenced relationships. This framework was used to outline how a community used knowledge and experiences observed from other communities to make informed decisions as how to best serve students and implement a *Freedom of Choice* plan. To what degree the national and state events regarding the Civil Rights movement impacted the decision making of local school leaders was a piece of evidence examined through this framework. Furthermore, the relationship between the school leadership and the teachers had to be examined. The model framework presented was used as a guide to examine the interpretation of the circumstances surrounding the *Freedom of Choice* plan.

The following graphic was created by the researcher based on interpretations from the literature to represent the initial conceptual framework of this study. Figure 1 represents the factors believed to have impacted the *Freedom of Choice* Plan of the community in this research.



*Figure 1. Factors Impacting Freedom of Choice Plan*

### **Methodological Framework**

A historical case study approach was determined to be an appropriate method for studying the process by which change was brought to an existing institution. Creswell (2007) and Denzin (1989) describe a historical case study in the context of the researcher that presented the life events of a subject; the context may have been the subject's family, society, or the history, social, or political trends of the times. Over fifty years ago, Edward Suchman, John Dean, and Robin Williams (1958) recommended this approach as the process by which school desegregation within a school system should be carefully reported. In their recommendations for conducting case study research in this area, they offered the following advice:

Various methods and techniques of desegregation should be described, including an account of the actual procedure by which the technique was

introduced and carried through. Incidents taking place in schools should be documented. Such reports of desegregation should come from all levels: school administrators, teachers, pupils, and organizations. (p. 87)

An emergent design was used in this study. The initial plan for research could not be tightly prescribed, and all phases of the process were subject to slight change after the researcher began to collect data (Creswell, 2007). This emergent design allowed for the key idea of qualitative research, which is to learn about issues from participants and to guide data collection (Creswell). Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest that research questions should aim at the behaviors, events, beliefs, attitudes, structures, and processes of a particular phenomenon. Research questions in this study were designed to provide a description of experiences of those involved in the desegregation of a public school in the South under the *Freedom of Choice* plan.

### **Context**

Creswell (2007) noted that qualitative case studies are distinguished by the size of the bounded case. Further, Stake (1995) identified three variations of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. The intrinsic model is commonly used to learn about a unique phenomenon. The instrumental model is used to provide a general understanding of subtle matters about a phenomenon that may be typically overlooked. The collective model is used to gather an understanding of multiple cases with common characteristics. For the purpose of this research, the intrinsic case study model was selected because the context of the research was on the case itself as it presented a unique and unusual situation relative to the manner in which one school district addressed *Freedom of Choice*. This case study told the stories and gave meaning to

the experiences of the stakeholders from a southern community during the time of desegregation in the 1960s and early 1970s.

## **Setting**

Although legislation declaring racially segregated schools became prevalent after the 1954 *Brown* decision, the southern town in this research did not begin integration until 1965. A voluntary period offered Black students the choice of attending a previously all-White junior high or high school. This *Freedom of Choice* plan was implemented two years prior to legally mandated integration in the state. By 1971 the school system was fully integrated.

The school system used for this case study was created in October 1961. Property and control shifted from the surrounding county system to the newly formed city system in October 1962. A total of eight school buildings, two for Black students and six for White students, were transferred to the control of the city school system to serve approximately 2,000 students. According to archived Board of Education minutes 516 Black students were enrolled in the Black high school with 270 of those students living outside the city limits.

As of 2015, the school system had grown to serve over 8,000 students. The system has a total of eleven school buildings now that are both economically and demographically balanced. The system is comprised of eight elementary schools, one middle school, one junior high school, and one senior high school. The former Black high school exists today as the middle school which is home to the school system's 1,100 sixth and seventh grade students. The former Black elementary school exists today as a community center which houses programs such as the Boys and Girls Club,

a child care facility, a Head Start program, a senior citizens' center, and a recreation facility. The facility was converted to a community center in 1983 as the school system consolidated school campuses.

## **Participants**

Creswell (2007) stated that data saturation can be met by including three to five participants in case study projects, and a small sample size is acceptable in qualitative research because a rigorous and systematic methodology can be used. Merriam (1998) outlined purposive or purposeful sampling as a common approach for sample selection in qualitative research. Purposeful sampling was used for this study. Participants were selected based on Merriam's assumption that purposeful sampling would allow for discovery, understanding, and insight from a group from which the most can be learned. For the purpose of this research twenty-one former teachers and administrators were identified as potential subjects for interview.

Potential interview study participants were generated through a collaborative effort of the researcher, co-researcher, and research chair. Dialogue occurred to identify individuals who could potentially contribute to this study based on community members who still are available and accessible. An interview with the former superintendent who served during the time of integration was conducted as a portion of the pilot study of this research. Responses from the superintendent were also used to identify potential participants. Finally, the researcher who currently serves in the district was able to identify through conversations with veteran employees a list of names of people who would be potentially available participants. The research team cross-referenced the lists of potential participants and narrowed the list to individuals who



were referenced by multiple sources. A theoretical sampling approach was used. The researcher chose sources that were most apt to recall events and help develop the story of the southern community's efforts with school integration.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The primary reason for the selection of this particular school system as the site of this research was the researcher's inherent interest in this school system and its unique and rich history. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested that researchers should study something in which one is not directly involved because it is often difficult to distance oneself from personal concerns. Although the researcher works in the school system, this obstacle has been addressed by selecting a time frame of some forty years past and a topic for which the researcher was not directly involved.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is much that has been written about *de jure* segregation which was prevalent, particularly in the South, (Solomon, 1968) and the negative experiences which ensued when schools were mandated to integrate. Numerous studies and journal articles exist documenting the perceptions of teachers and students who were involved in desegregating public schools in the 1960s and 1970s (Danns, 2008; Smrekar, 2009; Verden, 2005). However, there is limited research on *Freedom of Choice* endeavors which were attempted in some systems prior to federally mandated integration. This is a community story that has been left untold and a history that has not been recorded. The literature documenting perceptions of teachers, students, and administrators related to desegregation in this particular southern community is almost non-existent. This study examined the community story not previously recorded from

the perspective of those who lived it. Thus, this study contributed to the knowledge of educational history. It may also be used to identify current or future staff development needs or community programs in the area of racial relations in this community and in the entire nation.

### **Data Collection**

Following approval by the Institutional Review Board, individuals identified as potential participants were contacted via electronic mail, telephone, or written request to solicit participation and schedule an initial meeting. The scope of the study was discussed with the individuals, and an invitation to engage in a dialogue or informal interview was presented at the initial meeting. The informed consent form was presented, reviewed, signed, and an interview was scheduled. A variety of data collection strategies were used in this research study. Strategies included a review of archives and documents, interviews, and analysis of secondary and existing data.

A semi-structured approach was used for conducting the interviews. The same interview protocol was used during all initial interviews. Guiding questions were included in the process to facilitate the conversation with the participants. Both open-ended (divergent) and closed (convergent) questions were asked. Additionally, the researcher allowed dialogue and participant responses to direct probing questions and reflective conversation. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Detailed notes were taken documenting the body language, emotions, and posture of the participant during the interview. A thick and rich description of the context from which the data was collected may allow a reader to evoke feelings and develop a sense of connection with the participants in the study (Creswell & Miller, 2007).

Interview participants were willing stakeholders identified as participants of the integration efforts. Participants' identities were protected throughout the study. Pseudo names were used in the analysis section. Records of the study were kept confidential and later destroyed at the conclusion of the research project. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Participant feedback was utilized to ensure validity of the researcher's interpretations and conclusions derived from the data collected. A mindful attempt was made to ensure trustworthiness of the researcher. Doyle (2007) states member checking is a way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participant's experiences. Therefore, efforts were made to allow participants to edit, clarify, elaborate, or delete words from the researcher's interpretations. The researcher shared the viewpoints and data interpreted with the participants to confirm accuracy and correct any miscommunications.

The use of multiple data sources in the historical case study was important. These sources assisted in seeking and corroborating different perceptions. In addition to focused interviews, the researcher examined archival records including an in-depth study of written documents including school board minutes, court orders, school district artifacts, and local media accounts of desegregation events.

### **Data Analysis**

A systematic approach to analyzing the data was used. All of the data, archival and oral, were categorized according to major themes. Ryan and Bernard (2003) state that theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research. The themes emerged from the literature review and the interviews. Through the use of

content analysis or latent coding the researcher identified patterns and relationships among the categories through examination. Content analysis is described as the review of text seeking word repetition, careful reading of blocks of text searching for commonalities, and an intentional analysis of linguistic searching for features such as common metaphors and transitional statements (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). All of the data collected contributed to Chapter 4 of this study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Joppe (2000) defined reliability as the extent to which results are consistent over time; an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability. If the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable. Stenbecka (2001) describes reliability of a qualitative study as a measure to evaluate a purpose of explanation or measure of ability to generate an understanding. She further states reliability is a difficult concept to associate with qualitative research because understanding and explanation are not quantifiable entities. Patton (2001) adds that trustworthiness between the researcher and participants is a crucial element to generating a reliable study.

The concept of validity is described by a wide range of terms in qualitative studies. This concept is not a single, fixed, or universal concept, but rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects (Winter, 2000). Although some qualitative researchers have argued that the term “validity” is not applicable to qualitative research, at the same time they have realized the need for some kind of qualifying check or measure for their

study. For example, Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that the validity is affected by the researcher's perception of validity in the research and his/her choice of paradigm assumption. In qualitative research, validity is whether or not one gets a true picture of the process or behavior being examined.

Reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor, and quality in qualitative paradigm. Davies and Dodd (2002) state that the term rigor appears in reference to the meaning of reliability and validity in qualitative research. Additional terms associated with qualitative research validity which are relevant to this study are credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Trochim, 2006). Credibility refers to the manner in which the participants of the research perceive how well the researcher told their story. Transferability is a term associated with the degree to which the results of the qualitative research can be generalized to other contexts or settings. Confirmability refers to the degree to which the research can be corroborated with others.

Triangulation is another concept often used in qualitative research to increase credibility and validity. Cohen and Manion (2000) define triangulation as an attempt to explain more fully the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint. O'Donoghue and Punch (2003) refer to triangulation as a method for cross-checking data from multiple sources. Triangulation was used in this research by exploring archival data, conducting interviews with multiple participants, and researching and reviewing existing literature.

### **Ethical Considerations and IRB**

The researcher was responsible for following ethical principles to protect the integrity of the study. A deontological approach was used. This approach is defined as

a code of ethics that is based on a universal code (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Active consent of all participants was sought. Participants were informed in writing and reminded verbally of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were kept anonymous to all parties outside of the researcher. Responses and written records were kept confidential, and pseudo names were used for the participants in the reporting process.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations associated with this study. This study was limited as it focused only on one school district in the southern United States. The focus was limited to a time period between approximately 1965 and 1972 concentrating on the events as they were recalled by a limited number of eligible participants. Stakeholder availability was a limitation since the study was conducted forty years after the desegregation efforts took place. Recollections might be somewhat limited after so many years have passed. Additionally, some of the situations that occurred may carry some negative and hurtful memories or may be difficult to share because what was done may not be acceptable in today's view. Thus, participants may have chosen not to share those experiences. The researcher tried to deal with this by establishing trust, giving respondents time to think and share, and conducting more than one interview when the level of sharing seemed to be shallow or difficult.

Another limitation of the study was the researcher and any subjective bias that may have evolved in the interview process. The primary research instrument used to collect data was face-to-face interviews which allowed for open dialogue. Opinions and feelings of the research participants were collected and analyzed through the lens of a

Caucasian female. Some of the participants were African-American. This racial difference within this setting might have caused some participants to feel that they had to temper their sharing. The researcher used standard processes such as reflexivity to overcome any bias. Reflexivity is defined by Harry, Sturges, and Klingler (2005) as the researcher explicitly disclosing biases, assumptions, and aspects of their background that could influence interpretations. Further, reflexivity is described as recognition of the researcher having influence on the engagement of the participants (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). The researcher also shared the findings with other researchers who examined data and verified findings for accuracy. Reviewers were selected from each racial background.

A final limitation of this study was the research was based on the assumption participants answered the interview questions truthfully. Assuming the responses were truthful, the researcher was also charged with accurately articulating the perceptions gathered from the data collection.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the methods used to conduct this research study. The research questions used to guide this study were also outlined. This was a historical case study intended to document the story of one southern community's efforts to integrate public schools through a *Freedom of Choice* plan prior to being mandated to do so. The chapters that follow are designed to describe the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

Across the South, during the 1960s, school desegregation was a powerful and difficult campaign fought in both the courts of law and the courts of public opinion. As previously documented within this research, some communities chose to resist desegregation by either closing public schools or instigating threats of intimidation and violence; other systems allowed students to attend the school they wanted through a *Freedom of Choice* plan. *Freedom of Choice* plans allowed students to have a choice about the school they attended. This was a contrast to the previous concept that forced students to attend a school designated for them based on their race.

The southern community in east Alabama represented in this research implemented a *Freedom of Choice* plan in 1965 allowing all eleventh and twelfth graders the choice of which school they could attend. After a two-year voluntary period of *Freedom of Choice*, and a two-year phase in period, a full integration plan was established to be in place for the 1970–1971 school year.

Much of the violence of this time period has been well documented. The purpose of this research study was to document the efforts and processes of stakeholders of an Alabama school system which sought to integrate its schools before the mandated legislation to do so was in place. An additional purpose of this research was to expose the efforts made in a community which avoided Civil Rights violence. The researcher sought to provide a recorded history of this experience from the perspectives of the



educators and students involved in the process of school racial desegregation in the late 1960s. The research is meant to record a missing part of the history and to honor the work that was done during the first several years of their process. This research is an attempt to record a small segment of a larger history in order to gain a better understanding of the *Freedom of Choice* movement through the lens of participants with first hand accounts. The world around *Freedom of Choice* was very different for all of the participants involved.

This study sought to examine the manner in which *Freedom of Choice* occurred from the perspectives of the teachers, students, and administrators involved. This research explored a community story that had been left untold and a history that had not been recorded. Qualitative methods were used to explore the school desegregation process for a public school system. The data sources used in this study were interviews and primary source documents.

### **Data Collection Processes**

Data collection processes consisted of a review of related literature, review of archival documents including board of education minutes, local newspaper articles, and nine semi-formal interviews. The research questions served as a guide for the conversation between the researcher and the participant. Probing questions were generated from the conversation with each participant. Copious and detailed notes were taken during interviews. In order to remain focused on the topics of discussion, each interview was audio-recorded (Merriam, 2009). The information gleaned for the review of documents and the results obtained from the interviews were integrated to

obtain the findings for this research. This study was designed to allow the researcher to investigate the following questions:

Question 1: What are faculty, students', and administrators' perceptions of why the *Freedom of Choice* program was begun and how it operated?

Question 2: What do faculty, students, and administrators view as the positive aspects of this experience for themselves, the school system, and the community?

Question 3: What do faculty, students, and administrators view as the negative aspects of this experience for themselves, the school system, and the community?

Question 4: What factors do faculty, students, and administrators perceive as facilitating the success of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative?

Question 5: What factors do faculty, students, and administrators perceive as hindering the success of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative?

## **Chapter Structure**

The acquired data and findings are presented in three sections within this chapter. This first section outlines the data collection procedures, as well as the setting of the study. The demographics of the nine participants are also described within the first section.

The next section of the chapter represents the perceptions of the nine interviewees. Interview data were coded based on common themes that emerged from the dialogue between the researcher and each participant. Accounts and specific recollections from the research participants were documented. This section is intended to show the history of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative in one school system through the participants' own voices, combined with documents from the time period related to the

context or the process. It is presented from the participants' perspectives allowing their own voice and experiences to outline how *Freedom of Choice* happened, barriers that existed, facilitating factors of the initiative, and eventual outcomes that emerged. It is presented so the reader can hear these voices as they spoke and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and feelings as they reflected upon this time in their lives.

The third, and final, section of this chapter identifies and places focus upon a discovery analysis of the information garnered. The data collected, including interview notes and primary source documents, are used to make inferences about the themes and outcomes that emerged from this study. A narrative approach is used to describe the discovery. In the following pages the accounts and perceptions of administrators, teachers, and students who participated in the *Freedom of Choice* in this east Alabama town are documented.

### **Setting**

The community documented in this research is less than a two-hour drive from Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham has been documented as one of the communities at the center of the Civil Rights movement's violence (Cozzens, 1997). In the spring of 1963, activists in Birmingham launched one of the most influential campaigns of the Civil Rights movement, the Project C, better known as The Birmingham Campaign. It would be the beginning of a series of lunch counter sit-ins, marches on city hall, and boycotts on downtown merchants to protest segregation laws in the city.

Over the next few months in 1963, the peaceful demonstrations would be met with violent attacks using high-pressure fire hoses and police dogs on men, women and

children alike — producing some of the most iconic and troubling images of the Civil Rights movement. President John F. Kennedy would later say, “The events in Birmingham...have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.” This is considered one of the major turning points in the Civil Rights movement and the “beginning of the end” of a centuries-long struggle for freedom (Cozzens, 1997, p. 16).

Even closer was another community not more than twenty miles away that garnered national attention as their school system attempted to integrate just a few years earlier. In 1963, in the community of approximately 30% Whites and 70% Blacks, a suit was filed by one of the Black community members for his son to attend the all-White school with peaceful integration as the goal. According to the recorded accounts of the events in this neighboring town, many efforts were made to integrate peacefully. The majority of the people within the community felt peaceful integration was an attainable goal.

As recorded in a written account at the local university, all started out as a normal day on September 2, 1963, in this neighboring town. The boys and girls prepared for school with high hopes of a peaceful integration of thirteen Black students into the former all-White high school. September 2, 1963, turned out to be anything but normal. Governor Wallace intervened and along with the United States Marshalls closed the schools under the guise of the fear of violence erupting, claiming safety was a concern. The governor of the state of Alabama used this event as a grand political stage according to one of the community members. The schools were closed for two weeks before all was settled. By this time, the community had become divided and the

majority of the White families had withdrawn their students and opted for private school or to send their students to neighboring systems. As a result of the government interference, the citizens of this community were left with many hard feelings and a destroyed public school system. One community member stated, "...this situation was taken out of our hands by Governor Wallace...if we had been left alone, I think it would have all worked out" (Wilson & Sabrino, 2014).

### **A New School System is Formed**

The school system used for this case study was created in October 1961. According to the local newspaper from a story printed on October 5, 1961, the local city council approved the formation of the new system by a five to three vote after a much debated and highly contested council meeting. There were a number of people within the community who voiced concerns over the fiscal demands of opening and operating an independent school system from the county. Property and control shifted from the surrounding county system to the newly formed city system in October 1962. A total of eight school buildings, two for Black students and six for White students and administration, were transferred to the control of the city school system to serve approximately 2,000 students. In the intervening period from the inception of the school system in 1962 to the initiation of *Freedom of Choice* in this community, the school system leadership worked to form a plan that would meet the federal guidelines for desegregation of public schools. This study examined the *Freedom of Choice* process from 1965 through 1970.

## **Participants**

From this newly formed school system, a total of nine individuals shared their account and perceptions of the *Freedom of Choice* era and desegregation efforts. The accounts were documented through a series of individual structured interviews. The participants who shared recollections ranged in age at the time of the interviews from 62 to 79 years of age. The group consisted of three female participants and six males, five Black and four White. The roles of the participant group during the late 1960s consisted of three teachers from the system, three school leaders, and three students. Each participant participated in a semi-structured interview process at a designated location of his or her choice at a time that was dictated by the participant. The individual interviews and dialogue lasted various lengths of time ranging from the shortest conversation of 48-minutes to the longest which was 97-minutes.

Table 1

*Respondent Demographics*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Gender</i>
Respondent 1	Teacher	Black	Male
Respondent 2	Administrator	White	Male
Respondent 3	Administrator	Black	Male
Respondent 4	Administrator	Black	Male
Respondent 5	Teacher	Black	Male
Respondent 6	Student	White	Female
Respondent 7	Student	White	Male
Respondent 8	Teacher	White	Female
<i>Respondent 9</i>	Student	Black	Female

The stories of the nine participants were told using their own words. The narratives were gathered under a set of common themes for comparison purposes. In addition to the data collected from the participants, primary source documents were also used to verify, substantiate, and further the depth of this study. Primary source documents included board of education minutes from the original county school system, board of education minutes from the newly formed city school system, local newspaper articles, and previous research from the local university. Common themes were used to consolidate the narratives and primary source documents. The findings are organized into the following sections: the planning and implementation of *Freedom of Choice*,

positive aspects of *Freedom of Choice*, negative aspects of *Freedom of Choice*, facilitating factors, and obstacles encountered during the *Freedom of Choice* era.

### **Beginning of Freedom of Choice**

According to Board minutes from May 11, 1965, the five members of the local Board of Education met with the city council in a called joint meeting to discuss compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As an outcome of the meeting the local school board was charged with the responsibility to devise a plan that would meet the needs of the students and community while aligning with the Civil Rights legislation. Unanimous support from the city council was given to the board to move forward with the creation of a plan. The following week the *Freedom of Choice* plan was presented.

The following resolution was taken from the Board of Education minutes of the May 18, 1965, meeting.

Be it resolved that (this school system) shall submit a plan of desegregation to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which shall provide for the following:

1. Give freedom of choice to parents, guardians, or persons standing in loco parentis to pupils in grades 1, 7, 11, and 12 for the school year 1965-1966.
2. Provide for parents, guardians, or persons standing in loco parentis to students who will be in grades 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 during the 1965-1966 school year to, for compelling academic or geographic reasons to apply to the Board for permission to send their children to schools other than ones which they previously attended, or to which they were initially assigned for 1965-1966.

Attorney and Superintendent are hereby instructed to have prepared for Board action on May 25 a detailed plan to implement the foregoing, using the guide lines published by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare as a guide.



The following week at the May 25, 1965, Board of Education meeting, the recorded minutes reflect that such a plan was created and presented. The plan contained six sections outlining specific details with regard to:

1. *Freedom of Choice* for grades 1, 7, 11, and 12
2. Dates for registration and the process for registration
3. Personnel assignments
4. Registration for pupils outside the city limits
5. Notification procedures for school selection
6. Plan for additional grades to be added to the choice plan.

The plan was unanimously approved. An article from the local newspaper on May 27, 1965, contained a summary of the Board approved plan. This article was considered to be the first public communication of the Board of Education's officially approved *Freedom of Choice* plan. The following Tuesday at the June 1, 1965, Board of Education meeting, the first request was made for Black students to be admitted to the former White high school to enroll in the summer school program. Board minutes of the June 1, 1965, meeting and an article from the local newspaper on June 11, 1965, reflect that with a unanimous vote five Black students were allowed to register for summer classes at the former White high school due to the fact no summer program was offered at their high school.

### **Participants' Views**

From the nine stories told, the exact manner in which the *Freedom of Choice* efforts and initial desegregation plans were initiated may not have been completely captured and may not be representative of all stories that could be told. However, a

general consensus was very clear. All participants agreed that the *Freedom of Choice* movement was the right thing to do, and that the efforts made in their community to desegregate schools were completed with little controversy.

Additionally, several primary source documents promote the same idea, as recalled by the participants interviewed, that this community acted responsibly and did what needed to be done. An excerpt from the local newspaper printed in June 1965 outlines the manner in which *Freedom of Choice* and eventually total school desegregation was handled in this community.

Public school desegregation came to (this town) Monday, quietly. The event was almost routine. There was not tug of war between opposing sides, no name-calling, no shouting defiance, and no taking advantage of a sensitive situation by any special interest group. (This town) acted grown up. School officials met their responsibility as men who recognize the supremacy and authority of law. They accepted their obligations to see that the plan they had submitted to Federal authorities was carried out honestly, fairly, and in a dignified manner...

Respondent 1 (R1) who served as a teacher during the late 1960s had very little recollection about significant efforts being made to publicize the desegregation efforts prior to the *Freedom of Choice* initiative being presented to the faculty. He stated, ...we were just told by the principal that this was happening...I just assumed it was because of a law or it was a part of the Civil Rights movement...we had heard rumors that a 'choice' plan may be coming, but no one ever formally announced it to us...as coaches we probably got a little bit of a notice it was going to happen prior to anyone else.

R1 further explained he and his colleagues had heard rumors and discussions through town that a desegregation plan was coming, and they felt like it was inevitable. Other than those who served as coaches, teachers never had any kind of preparation or communication before the plan was publicly announced.

I remember the coaches being called in to the central office in the late spring or maybe it was early summer. We had some discussions with the superintendent about things like who the good athletes were at the Black school...we talked about who coached which sports. I remember a question being asked about would the Black and White coaches be able to share a dressing room without issue. We said sure...there were never any problems in our group with things like that. So, I guess this was the first time I really knew for sure that was a plan being developed to allow kids a choice about where they wanted to go to school.

### **School Leader Perspective**

*Freedom of Choice* implementation was a very tedious and well-designed plan as the story is told by one of the school system's initial district leaders. Respondent 2 (R2), who served as the school system's superintendent through a portion of the desegregation process, shared in his story as to how *Freedom of Choice* was derived.

...when the city system was formed by separating from the county school system, there were very careful and calculated things that took place...the city officials knew that a special and talented person would be needed as superintendent to make all of this work. The Board of Education set their eyes on who they wanted and who they thought could do the job, and they went out and got him. The five-member all-White male Board was in place one year prior

to the first superintendent being selected. The first superintendent had previously served as a high school principal in one of the schools that was transitioned from the county system.

R2 further explained that the initial contract offered to the first superintendent was a healthy, guaranteed four-year deal worth up to about \$20,000 per year. He further stated:

...the deal was worth every penny because many people truly believed that the direction that the new school system was headed in would be perceived as a joke...a true *Freedom of Choice* in this area of the country was just not considered an option due to the culture so deeply rooted in the South. Many believed the Black students would choose the Black school and the Whites would choose the White school.

In the early years of the school system, the Board of Education would meet every week. Board meetings were typically on Tuesday nights, and they would usually last from 7:00 PM until 12:00 midnight. R2 said, "We knew we had to do this the first year because there was just so much to be done." The Board agreed to allow the Superintendent to be the CEO of the system, and the Board would accept the role as policy makers. The Board of Education meetings were eventually cut back to one meeting per month.

As the *Freedom of Choice* initiative began, just as suspected, there was not much student interest in transferring to another school. Two causes were noted for the limited movement. One reason was the schools were somewhat crowded based on attendance zones and there was not physical space to accommodate many additional

students. Secondly, not many Black families opted to move from their assigned school, and no White families opted to go to the Black school. Fear of the unknown and comfort in familiarity were cited as reasons. However, some families did apply to attend a school other than the one for which they were assigned the previous school year. Of those who did apply to transfer, all but thirteen applications were approved on the initial submission. According to the August 24, 1965, Board of Education minutes, one 11<sup>th</sup> grade student application was denied because after a review of his transcript, he did not actually have enough credits to be considered a junior. However, after an appeal at the next Board meeting his transfer request was approved. Twelve other elementary applications were denied due to the fact the school of choice was at capacity. These families were given the option to attend a school of second choice. The September 6, 1965, Board minutes reflect that three Black students enrolled and attended classes at the former White high school that fall. R2 stated:

The groundwork had been laid for the system. We had to work all of those long hours because no written policies of any kind were in place. We knew integration was coming, so we just approached the *Freedom of Choice* efforts along with the other work that had to be done. We only had a few students who opted to go to a different school. I do not recall an exact number, but the bottom line is we made available the opportunity for choice. As the leadership, we could not force choice. We knew it was just a matter of time before there would be follow up from the Courts for all public schools. I am proud of our efforts, and I think the *Freedom of Choice* paved the way for what eventually happened (with regard to integration).

R2 recalled the lack of movement among the Black students to White schools being attributed to “Black students being afraid.” Society, especially in the South, was in such a strained state with regard to racial tension. While *Freedom of Choice* did exist and did allow the opportunity for a few students to freely go to another school, it paved the way and started the conversation for the next steps within this school system. In 1968 an integration plan was developed and put in place for the 1969 school year. R2 recalled:

We had to go before Judge Johnson once we did receive the Court order to officially integrate our school system. By this time I had been named superintendent, and I took our school board attorney with me to present our plan to Judge Johnson and a panel of three other people. We stood before Judge Johnson for about three minutes and presented our plan of what we had done already and what we proposed. The Judge told us that we were the first school system that had been before his Court who actually wanted to do what was right by the children. He told us to go write our plan and formally present it. So, we did.

R2 further clarified:

Our plan was to allow for the 1968–1969 school year 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders attending the Black high school the choice to attend either the school they were currently attending or to go to the White high school. Students were allowed to choose based on the courses they needed to take. Students in grades 10 and below did not have a choice. They were assigned a school based on residence.

Total integration or the first year of no student having a choice was 1970–1971.

We transitioned our system to one high school and one junior high school.

“Making a commitment to such a bold endeavor as *Freedom of Choice* is essential to promoting the success of the effort...commitment is the key.” This quote summarizes the conversation and account of *Freedom of Choice* with Respondent 3(R3). R3 was a school level leader in the system through much of the 1960s and 1970s. His belief was that it is “absolutely essential for the principal to believe that a quality, integrated education is better for children than a segregated one.” R3 expressed strong convictions to the need for a commitment to the cause.

Your belief or non-belief will be reflected in the behavior you exhibit. If you believe in desegregation and act accordingly, the message will be clear. But, if you do not believe it or were to have seen it as just another burdensome federal intrusion, then that message would be equally clear.

In addition to the commitment to the cause, R3 also felt strongly that *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation efforts happened because of the leadership and their ability to take calculated risks and establish a climate that promoted desegregation.

Principals and system leaders, especially principals, of desegregated schools must be risk takers to a certain degree. Doing something like this (*Freedom of Choice*) in our part of the world was a big risk. We had to be committed to this cause and place the goals of desegregation of our schools as a priority over personal well-being. Now fortunately for us, all worked out well, and there were no major issues, but we had to take that risk.

R3 emphasized that *Freedom of Choice* happened successfully, albeit slowly, due to the school leaders being able to “keep a pulse” on the climate of the building.

There are two pieces to consider when you talk about school climate. The first one is visual. People have to see that they are welcome. They have to feel at home. We tried to create a welcoming environment. The second piece is convincing people, all people—parents, students, teachers—that they are safe and they are welcome. Seeing it is one thing. We could control what people were able to see to a large degree, but each person has to believe for himself the second part. That takes a little longer. You asked me the question how did I think *Freedom of Choice* happened. I am telling you I think it happened because we made a commitment to do what was right, and we stuck to it. I think we all knew it was the right thing to do, and we believed it was going to happen eventually anyway...and should happen.

Respondent 4 (R4) came to this school system as a recruited principal during the end of the *Freedom of Choice* era. His account as to how *Freedom of Choice* happened was slightly different than the other system leaders in the sense that he felt like *Freedom of Choice* may have taken place because

someone in some high office probably told them they had to do it...it was not my experience in this system that they would just venture off and do something this bold on their own...I cannot say for sure because I started working here toward the end of that process...but I believe it was probably a response to something they knew they were going to have to do anyway.



R4 went on to further state that he “felt like desegregation was the right thing to do.” He believed that it was a “slow process” and “...while it was probably court mandated, it appeared as though the community responded well to it, and most people went on about their business quietly.”

### **Teacher Perspective**

Respondent 5 (R5) noted, “As a teacher in the African American community we were largely unaware of the reasons students were going to be given a choice as to where they wanted to go to school.” R5 recalled a lot of talk back in those days among his peers about the possibility of desegregation but could not recall any formal meetings to discuss why this was going to happen or how it was going to happen.

There were many ideas being passed around back then by the people and teachers. Some thought the system was going to rob the Black school of all the excellent students and hand pick who got to move. Some of us thought we were going to be forced to integrate anyway so this was just our system’s way of handling it. I do not remember any formal meeting I ever went to where it was discussed why or how—we just all assumed it was going to happen. People just talk.

R5 stated that he was a little concerned about *Freedom of Choice* at first. He said,

...we all thought desegregation would be a good thing...we just did not know where we would end up or if we would keep our job. We looked at it as something new and as something we thought we wanted. There was definitely some anxiety, but that is usually the case with anything new. I guess it could be

described as we thought the grass may be greener on the other side, but we were a little nervous about how we would get to the other side.

R1 recalled that he had overheard some of the parents in the community talking about the need to consider integration. He felt that some of his colleagues may have also tried to influence the Board and superintendent to consider a plan. One very interesting point brought out by many of the participants is the perception that the local university may have had a significant influence on the initial *Freedom of Choice* plan. R1 stated:

...being a university town, I feel like that with a predominantly well-educated community the people just understood and saw the need to make this (integration) happen...as a teacher and a coach, I would often get approached or have side conversations about integration and all that was going on in the country...I guess our town just maybe understood the message a little better that it was just the right thing to do. Maybe because I was a teacher and a coach people just felt like they could talk to me about it.”

All three of the school leaders interviewed referenced the nature or demographics of the community as having a positive impact on the successful and uneventful school desegregation process. Being a community that houses a large university, it was presented in the dialogue that a majority of the population in this community seems well-educated and open-minded to the change that was taking place. R2 stated that this was a “relatively educated community for the most part” and there was “about a 30% Black population also.” He seemed to think that these two factors were important positive contributors to the cause. R3 supported the same idea by saying “there was just not that typical redneck attitude that was so stereotypical of most

of the South...the people here just seemed to understand the importance of what was happening.” R4 echoed the same ideas in several of his statements. He referenced multiple times that “the university made an impact on this effort.” He followed that by stating “education and equity were just priorities for this town.” R4 recalled how the desegregation efforts were not as smooth in neighboring towns.

I would say again that because we had so many people in our town tied in some way to the university, our people were just better educated and maybe had a better understanding of where society was going or where it needed to go. We simply did not have the issues like they did just down the road...we did not close any schools...we did not burn any schools...I just don't remember any major issues of any kind. Not to say we did not have a few bumps in the road, but I am talking about major things, and we just did not have them.

R1 recalled from his teacher perspective that *Freedom of Choice* seemed to have worked for this community for very similar reasons as stated by the students and the school leaders. The positive aspects that R1 recalled,

...we just knew this was the right thing to do...from my personal experiences, I could not tell you of one single problem I ever had...we had great school leadership who just put the plan together, and we had a great town that accepted, and we made it work. One of the most positive aspects of the whole thing is that we just made it work. People got to know the other side. There was no media coverage that I remember. There was no fuss; not a lot of attention...we just did it and kept a low profile. It was about doing what was right for kids.

## Student Perspective

Respondent 9 (R9), who was a sixth grade Black female student at the time of the initial *Freedom of Choice* opportunity, was born and raised in this community. She was the younger daughter of two children born to, as she described her parents, “blue-collar workers of the community.” Being a young Black female at the time of the initial *Freedom of Choice*, she opted not to go to the former all-White school the first year, but she did the second year. When asked how the decision to change schools was made she shared the following.

...Alabama was slow to move on this. *Brown v. Board* happened before I was born, and here I am in junior high and we are one of the last states to move on this thing...we still had segregated restaurants, you may have had the shopping centers and stuff with common areas like grocery stores and things like that, but basically most things were still segregated.

R9 was asked to share how she knew of the *Freedom of Choice*. She shared that she did remember seeing some of the things on the television and remembered reading some things in the newspaper to have a general idea that change across the country was needed and coming. She had a real sense that things could be better.

There had been conversations at church about the integration because everybody knew it was moving forward in that direction, and there were pros and cons from members about wanting to do it and not wanting to do it. And you know these people in church were probably the same teachers in your school so you have to remember that we were just in a smaller community at that time compared to what it is now. There was a lot of dialogue I heard growing up

about that, and so that conversation would extend to home around the dinner table, and my parents and my grandparents were very much for it, and we used to talk about why it was important; you know, to go. I wanted to go just based on the conversations being held. It wasn't an easy decision to go but I looked at it from an opportunity or perspective that I want to go because now I can get really good books, and I can learn, and I can go to college.

R9 shared that she did not change schools the first year the option was presented for a couple of reasons. One reason she stated was fear of what may happen and a fear of the unknown. A second reason was no one else her age was willing to make the move.

I don't think the junior high had any African Americans to go the first year. Now there may have been, but for some reason I don't think so. I think it was about five or six Black students that went together to the high school. They were all going to be seniors. I want to say that they were good friends and they decided, 'Let's go do this.' The junior high didn't have anybody.

R9 further went on to say,

I think it was because of those students that went to the White high school and the experiences that they had, the counselors at my school worked with the men of the churches to come up with a group to bridge this transition and try to make it a little bit smoother. We transitioned to predominantly White schools the next year as junior high students because this was really a change that was going to be different and good. I remember working with the counselors and having those

conversations with my parents and grandparents. We decided to turn in our forms to change schools.

My church had a big influence on me and how this happened. You know there was always a really close bond between African American families because of church. Historically, we went to the same church, we grew up in the same church so we had that bond and those people influenced me.

Respondent 6 (R6), who was a ninth grade student at the time of the initial *Freedom of Choice*, remembered the events happening around her, but not having a real understanding of what was actually taking place. R6 said:

...I remember reading the news and sort of knew what was going around the country. When I heard that we may have Black students coming to our school, I remember being a little frightened just because of the things I had heard and read. At that time I was under the impression that it was Court mandated as a part of the Civil Rights movement. I remember we had a school assembly right after school had started, and we were told that some Black students were volunteering to come to our school, and that they would be starting classes with us. I never really knew exactly why or how until much later.”

Respondent 7 (R7), who was a senior at the time of the initial *Freedom of Choice*, also had a difficult time remembering any formal conversations or information that was presented to him about desegregation. “As a student, I am not really sure what all went in to making it happen. As a senior I was worried about other things like playing ball, and it just did not seem like a big deal to me.”

### **Positive Aspects of *Freedom of Choice***

*Freedom of Choice* and school integration seemed to bring many positive attributes and was very well received by the Alabama community in this research. All nine participants were able to pinpoint specific recollections as to how they believed the positive aspects of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative far outweighed any negative influences that may have existed. This case offers examples of the strong positive impact a school environment can have on a community and that a community can have on its schools.

### **School and School System Perspective**

The three participants who were students during the time of *Freedom of Choice* in the researched community contributed very consistent statements to this body of work. R7, who was a senior, stated,

I feel like this brought our community closer together...it eventually gave everyone better opportunities. I enjoyed playing sports. I saw it more after I left high school than in my senior year, but I think sports really played a large role in getting the Blacks and Whites involved and working together. We had one Black student try out for and make our team my senior year. It was the beginning of where we are today.

R6, who was a ninth grader, expressed that she was awarded new learning and new cultural experiences for the first time in her life due to the *Freedom of Choice*. She felt like it “opened her eyes to a whole new world” and gave her a better understanding of society.

I guess you could say I lived kind of a sheltered life. Until those Black students came to our school, I had never been around a Black person—not at school, not at home, not at church. After a while, I realized we were both reluctant and a little bit afraid. As it turns out, I became good friends with one of the Black girls in my class. I would have maybe never known how much we had in common if it were not for the *Freedom of Choice* and the decisions that were made.

R9 spoke of similar relationships being made. One in particular was with a young White girl who seemed to be experiencing some of the same feelings as the Black girls, but for different reasons.

...a new girl came, my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year... she was White, and her parents had lived in a neighboring town before moving here. We became good friends. She was beautiful...looked like a Barbie doll with dark hair. She was so pretty. All the boys loved her because she was so pretty. All the girls hated her because she was so pretty. So here she was being ostracized not because of her color but because of her beauty. She and I had classes together and got to be very best friends. I'd go to her house after school sometimes, and we would spend the night. That was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and back then that kind of thing was not seen as much between races.

R9 also shared that while it did take a little time for the initial transition to become fully accepted, by the time she had left junior high and transitioned to high school, the full integration went as smoothly as possible. She felt like things were just as smooth when she graduated as they are today.



R4, who served in a school leadership role, also referenced the positive impact extracurricular activities had in displaying to the community that *Freedom of Choice* and school desegregation was a good thing to have happen. Particularly, he stated, ...it seemed as though athletics played a dual role in the desegregation movement. Your average 'Joe' walking the street may not see or know what is going in the math classroom, but a whole lot more people know what takes place on the ball fields and the ball courts. Sports, in a way, was a public window to see if this (*Freedom of Choice*) was going to work with the Black students and the White students competing together and working together. Also, it seems that as the sports teams are successful, especially football and basketball, the whole school year seems to go better...so, all that being said, I do believe the way our students played and presented themselves on the field really made a positive impact.

R4 also emphasized that the honesty and transparency of the district leadership played an extremely important role in the success of *Freedom of Choice*. He discussed the specific details from conversations with individuals that "recruited" him to come to this community. R4 recalled,

I was one of the, if not the first, Black school administrator hired in this community during this transition. (They) were very upfront with me in our first conversations about the job. I remember asking the question how do you think I will be perceived if I am the first Black school leader you hire? The superintendent's response was, "I don't know. I haven't done anything like this before." This seems like a simple exchange, but it meant the world to me

because it seemed so honest. I knew I was being recruited because of my race, and I was okay with that. My race was never an issue when we discussed the needs of running a school. I just felt very comfortable with the superintendent and assistant superintendent. I have the utmost respect for the assistant superintendent. She tried to take me with her when she left this system to take a job in neighboring community...I would have gone with her, but I just did not want to ask my family to move again. The openness in the beginning and the support throughout my tenure by the district level leadership was a very positive thing.

R2, the superintendent through a portion of the *Freedom of Choice* era, also attested to the strong and honest communication between the schools and the central office as being a positive aspect of this movement. He remembered very little school desegregation controversy ever making it to his office. R2 stated,

...issues between Black and White students were minimal...they were typically handled at the school level and resolved before we ever had to get involved...

R4 had a similar recollection.

We had a strong district level support. On the rare occasion an issue had to be taken to the next level, the superintendent would always redirect the problem or concern back to us at the school. He would not allow stakeholders to circumvent me. The communication we had and the support they provided helped to make all of this change work in our town.”

### **Community Perspective**

In many ways the *Freedom of Choice* initiative in this small southern community was an initial, isolated effort to abolish the separate, but equal mentality so deeply

rooted in the South. Respondent 8 (R8), a White female former teacher, recalled it being so obvious that “most everywhere I turned there was a separation between the Blacks and the Whites.” She mentioned that while there may not be the signs and the requirements that once existed for separate but equal arrangements, the separation still existed in most of the community in the late 1960s.

...whether anyone would ever admit it or not, no matter what they may really have felt on the inside, the community was just like any other in the South when it came to Blacks being in one set of places and Whites being in other places... there just was not a lot of racial mixing...not in church, not in the stores, not in the parks, not in schools...people just went where they had always gone because it was comfortable to them, I guess.

R8 further made the point that it seemed to her as if the community was watching to see if the desegregation of schools was going to be successful. If it was successful, then perhaps it may show everyone that it is alright to desegregate in other areas.

...it was like the people were watching to see if this was going to work...if the kids in school can do this, then maybe we can, too. It was almost like everyone was holding their breath to see if something bad was going to happen.

Fortunately, from my experience, nothing really bad ever did happen. It was almost like the schools were used to teach the community a valuable lesson...we can do this.

R8 also recalled the total learning experience to have been such a positive thing for the community. There were occasions where not only were there fears and anxiety among the students, there were also the same emotions among the teachers. A

surprising example she shared had nothing to do with violence or threats, but the simple touch of another person.

Some of the White teachers were afraid...the Black kids would try to touch us and that scared the daylights out of some of us. But, after we stopped to find out why the Black students were touching us, it was because they had never been around a White person before. They had no idea what our skin felt like, or what our hair felt like. So they were not trying to sneak up on us to harm us, but they were just trying to learn. It is kind of funny to hear me say this now, but it really was a learning experience. I think all learning is a benefit to the community. We are all the same. We understand that better now, I guess, than we did back then. We all become better people when we take time to learn and appreciate other perspectives.

R2 mentioned that meeting with the various people in the community as the plans were laid out for *Freedom of Choice* was a critical component to the initiative's success. R2 recalled several different opportunities in which he involved the community.

I remember being in the doctor's office one day. I had fallen off a ladder and had broken my heel. While I was in the waiting room, a Black gentleman struck up a conversation with me. He said to me, "don't promise things to these kids you can't deliver." I remember telling him, "You have my word we will try every way we can to make this work out." At the time, we only had a few Black students that had opted to go to the (former) White high school. The students who opted

to go were seniors. They opted to go for the more challenging courses like the physics and trig. You know, things did work out.

I remember another time at a little league baseball game having a similar conversation with a parent of a White student. I do not think I ever did anything much by myself other than listen to people's concerns and try to answer any questions they had with honest answers. With regard to the community benefits, I think just being out there and taking time to listen and respond was a real benefit to this community.

As we moved to full integration in the early 1970s, I met with any parent in my office who wanted to do so, one at a time. I met with people all summer long. I think we only had one parent that decided to go to private school from all of those meetings.

R1 remembered just a couple of years prior to the *Freedom of Choice* being initiated by the public schools, the local university had also had its initial experience with integration. He seemed to think this event may have played a role in the decision of the schools to move in this direction. He again stated, "This was, after all, what the law said we were supposed to be doing anyway." R1 also stated,

It was in January of 1964, if I remember correctly, that (the local university) enrolled its first Black student. And if I am not mistaken, the second Black student came on board in the fall of '64...I know this had an impact on our community. While it was not welcomed with open arms by everyone, especially those in the White community, it was a huge step in what I believe to be the right

direction. In '66 we followed suit. This really started to change our community... in a good way, I believe.”

### **Negative Aspects of *Freedom of Choice***

The perception that few Blacks attempted to integrate through a *Freedom of Choice* did emerge from the data collected through the series of interviews associated with this research. Also emerging from the data were recollections of a few minor disciplinary incidents. Although there was absence of major violence and resistance to a desegregation effort in this community unlike many of the neighboring communities. While the community, in majority, appeared to be accepting of the *Freedom of Choice* and eventual required racial integration efforts, it was also captured from the interviews that this effort was not free from some negativity and hurdles to overcome.

### **School and School System Perspective**

From his school leadership perspective, R4 shared his recollection of some of the negative aspects from the time of the initial *Freedom of Choice*, as well as his thoughts as to how some of the negativity has carried over for some forty-plus years through today. From the onset of his conversation, R4 stated that he was completely convinced that his race was the determining factor in his selection of being hired as a school leader in this district. He went on to say that he felt comfortable with the people he worked for and felt equally comfortable in his abilities, but he did think it to be somewhat of a negative aspect that race played such an important role in the selection process.

I felt like from day one that I was hired because I was a Black man. They had to hire a minority for this position. I feel like they liked me and they were confident

in my abilities, but it was no secret that I was chosen over other applicants because I was Black. In my first years as an assistant principal, I worked at two schools...I worked at (one of the) elementary schools half a day, and I worked at the junior high school half of the day. They were two totally different schools with totally different principals.

R4 went on to explain further that the two principals took a much different approach as to the role that each would allow him to play within the respective schools.

As an assistant principal at the elementary school, I felt like my principal was playing favorites and allowing decisions to be made that would please his tenured teachers; most all of them were White. He wanted to make sure he kept them happy. I feel like he held me back. He would only let me handle issues dealing with the Black kids. He did not hesitate to intervene or cut me off if he felt pressure from one of his faculty members or from a parent. At the junior high I did not feel that same resistance. The principal at that school was very accepting. He treated me fairly, and I felt like he had my back. I think we worked well as a team. He assigned me duties and expected me to get the job done.

When asked to describe how he felt during this time, R4 used the word "lonely."

He went on to say that maybe that was just part of the job. Within the school the teachers have each other, but there are no other administrators within the building to talk to or share ideas. He also said that at times though he felt isolated; it may have given him a better understanding of how some of the students may have felt.

Particularly, he felt as though he could relate to the Black students who had come over

to the new school. An observation that R4 pointed out of interest to him was that “within the walls of the school, segregation still took place even after *Freedom of Choice*.”

While the outside public witnessed a great effort to integrate our schools and our school leaders made special efforts to make sure it happened with little fanfare and virtually no controversy, the bottom line is there was still segregation. On Friday nights you may have seen Black and White students playing ball together, or you may have read in the paper about some special event with Black and Whites...but to walk the halls on a daily basis and look into the classrooms, you could easily see the majority of the Black kids were in the lower level classes together, and the advanced classes were mostly all White. It was that way in 1970, and it is still that way today. Also, in the beginning of the segregation you had few, if any, Black kids in the band...it was years before you ever saw even a token Black cheerleader. There were no Blacks in student leadership positions. There were various clubs in the school, but they were mostly segregated, too. It is somewhat better today, but it is still nowhere near where it should be. I encourage you to go look in any public school today and watch the kids in the cafeteria, for example. For the most part, just watch who sits with whom.

Another issue that I think is a negative today, as much as it was back then, is the lack of Black people in leadership roles; particularly Black males. I really think we need to do more...this has always been a problem.

I remember right after I was hired...I always dressed nice. You know, it was just expected that I dress professionally. Well, my point is the Black male who dresses nice seemed to be considered a preacher. I was in town one day in



my suit right after work and this White man asked me if I was a preacher and which church I was at...I said, "Hell no I am not a preacher." It just aggravated me that no one could perceive a Black man as a true professional back in those days...and I am not sure it is much better now.

R2 noted that one negative aspect he remembered was there were some teachers who decided to leave the system rather than be transferred or to follow through with the integration. He did say, "A few teachers left and went to teach at a private school or chose to do something different all together." He referenced that it was a negative that anyone would choose to leave, but at the same time it was maybe a good thing if those people did not want to be there for the right reasons.

...we had a few people opt to leave us rather than stay as a part of our team and move with us in the direction that we needed to go...fine enough, for every job vacancy that we had come open, there were usually thirty or more applications for people who were willing to buy into our vision.

Former student R9 did recall a couple of negative aspects that certainly could have been race related, but quickly noted that the experiences she shared, in hindsight, could have just as easily been typical adolescent type behavior since her *Freedom of Choice* era began in junior high. One incident she spoke of was related to feeling ostracized by her Black peers.

...they made fun (we call it bullying today) probably because of the choice that you and your parents made for you to go, and you did become ostracized by them, and they didn't want to do anything with you because you had betrayed the African American community, and that was just the bottom line in today's

language. They felt betrayed. They thought you had given up and forgotten your culture and your heritage to go to a White school because an opportunity had been provided and they had – and it is a real hard thing to describe – but what I can remember most is that you had racial tensions because of people that were different races, but then you had racial tensions within the races...

A second incident R9 recalled was a specific encounter that occurred with some White boys picking on her. While she recalled the negative aspect of the boys teasing her, she also vividly remembered another White boy coming to help her out of that situation.

I remember one boy coming up one day to my locker, and he just ranted all kinds of things like he didn't want me there, and y'all need to go back to your school, and I look around and there is nobody Black around but me...and I think that is why I met Skip, because his locker wasn't far from mine and he was behind that boy and I remember him walking up and that boy walked off and him saying "Oh you're having trouble getting your locker open." That's what I remember, that very first recollection I remember of Skip, and I never forgot that, and he would always smile and speak every time after then. I do not remember those boys ever bothering me again.

Former students R6 and R7 both noted some negative aspects. They each spoke of similar circumstances. R6, a female student, recalled,

...I do remember there seeming to be a few more fights at school when the Black students came. I am not sure really how any of them started. I think that maybe the boys were just trying to establish themselves...maybe there was just that

intimidation and trying to establish territory. I also remember some of my friends being afraid of the Black boys. The Black boys would sometimes make comments to us and try to touch us. I had a couple of my friends that left our school and went to private school.

R6 remembered “being in tune with the Civil Rights movement” and hoping that promoting integration would lead to a better life for all. She recalled it weighing heavy on her mind as to how this would impact everyone from the beginning. She categorized the first school year of desegregation by saying, “I did learn a lot that year...I had a good year academically, but it was a hell of a year socially.”

R7, a male student, had similar recollections,

It seemed like maybe some of the Black kids lost their identity...you know, at their old school they may have been the quarterback, or in student council, or chorus, or whatever...and now with us, they were just trying to fit in any way they could. I also remember noticing that the Black kids did not listen to the White teachers as well. It seemed to take a while for there to be real acceptance.

Similar to the accounts generalized by student R7, R2 spoke of a particular incident that he remembered as a school administrator in which some of the Black students seemed to push the limits of the White teachers. R2 shared,

I remember one incident where a group of boys (Black) pushed the limits early on. I think they were trying to see what they could get away with. I do not remember the specifics of what caused it or how it started...maybe it was just teenage boys pushing boundaries...Some of the Black kids did not want to go to class. We gave them a warning that it was time to go to class. We again said

you all have five minutes to get to class. No one moved. I told them, “If you are not where you are supposed to be in five minutes I am calling the police, and I am calling for a bus to take you home.” They did not budge. I followed through with what I said I would do. The boys were all sent home without any real incident. I met the parents and established what our expectations were going to be. I don’t remember ever having any more trouble with that group.

R1, who served as a teacher, reinforces the same type of negative aspects in his comments. He shared his perspective by stating,

One thing that I think hurt us was not having any faculty meetings to discuss the potential for problems. All of this just happened, and there was little or no preparation. It caused a great deal of stress on teachers. We had some kids who came in and tried to test the waters. Just like with any teenager, but because of the race issue, teachers seemed a little more timid to address issues...afraid the issue might explode. All in all, things worked fine, and we did not have any real major issues, but I think some of the minor things could have been handled better if teachers were trained and just not so afraid.

R1 also shared that he felt like there were some social issues that precipitated some of the controversies. He discussed that within the Black community the students who opted to go to the former White high school were placed in a situation where they did not really fit in either place—at school or in their neighborhood. He said he did not feel like those students really fit in with, nor were they truly accepted by the White students, and they were made fun of by their neighborhood kids for leaving them. He shared of a night when it all came to a head.

The students at the Black high school were having their spring dance. I think it was called May Night or something like that. There was a large fight that night at the dance. Some of the Black kids who had opted to go to the former White high school came over and tried to blend in at the dance. Some students from the Black high school did not like the fact that these guys had come back over to this school just to dance and party with them. The students from the Black school felt like this was their dance and those other guys thought they were too good or more important since they left for another high school. Words were exchanged. Names were called and a large fight ensued. Police and state troopers were called. It took a long time to get all clear. That night was one of the biggest negative or ugly incidents we ever had, and it was a social issue between the Black kids.

### **Facilitators of *Freedom of Choice* Success**

Three entities were consistently noted by the majority of the participants as being strong advocates for the *Freedom of Choice*. While a number of specific people were identified from within the school district and from within the community, the responses related to who served as the greatest advocates can be categorized into three distinct groups: the school and system leadership, the local university, and the community members as a whole.

As the respondents addressed the questions about advocacy for *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation in this school system and credited those whom they felt to be the most responsible, each group established the majority of credit to people one level higher on the hierarchy. The students gave the most credit to the teachers. The

teachers gave the most credit to the school leadership. The school leaders credited the university influence on the entire community.

From the student perspective R6 remembered,

The teachers were really good. They tried to make everyone feel as welcome as they could. One of my teachers I remember saying, “If you have any problems at all, do not hesitate to call me at home.” She gave us her home telephone number. Just the way she handled us in class I could tell she really cared about all of us and wanted us to be successful. She would go out of her way to make sure the Black kids were included. It is hard to explain. She did not give anyone preferential treatment, but she treated us all well—with respect.

R6 went on to say that she felt like the community was just a good place to live. She said that as in any place there would be problems, but the issues just seemed to always work out here because of the good people. R6 shared an additional story about one of her teachers that she felt exemplified the idea of good people doing good things to help others be successful.

I remember being in study hall one day in the library. I watched our librarian, I cannot remember her name, but anyway, she walked over to one of the Black students sitting at the next table and handed him a book and told him that she thought he may be interested in reading it. I am not sure why I was paying attention to this, but I was. I know he read it because I watched him the next several days. I remember asking him later what the book he was reading was. He told me it was some biography about a Black man who made it. It was about his story of perseverance and making it. That has always stuck with me because

I know the librarian was in her own way trying to reach out to the Black student and let him know everything was going to be okay.

R5 remembered the administration as being openly supportive and never intimidating. He credits his school principal as being one of the greatest advocates for the success of *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation. He remembered there being some “rough patches” and some instances in which not all teachers agreed with him on every decision. He went on to say that his principal was “very clear about where he stood on issues...there was never any guessing or doubt about what he thought.” R5 fondly reminisced,

I have nothing but the greatest admiration and respect for my former principal. He was one of the greatest men to work for as a new teacher I have ever met. He was there to lend support and help in any way he could. He was one of those guys who was very clear about his expectations. Once he knew you were doing your job and knew you could do your job well, he left you alone to do what you needed to do.

Teacher R1 spoke highly of several people and groups who he believed served as strong advocates for the *Freedom of Choice* efforts. He had strong convictions that the parents in the Black community played a very important role in the success of this endeavor. He referenced on several occasions that he felt strongly that parenting is not the same today as it was in the late 1960s.

We all know it was the law that really got the whole thing started, but I do believe there was a strong group of parents in our Black community that just did a really good job of raising their kids the right way back then. Black parents, different

than now it seems, taught their kids to do the little things...respect, honor, trustworthiness. Today we have more of a focus on handouts, and food stamps, and kids having kids. White students would also help Black students. I just never saw a lot issues in the halls and in classes. I think it was just a testament to the way kids were raised—Black and White. I think parents deserve some credit for placing a focus on the family and teaching kids to do the right thing.

R1 also gave significant credit to his school leadership for the success of the desegregation efforts. He mentioned several people by name in his conversations including his principal and his assistant principal. R1 stated, “They made sure discipline was instilled...and they made sure policy was followed fairly and consistently. They also hired good people.” He further went on to give significant credit to the local university as being a strong advocate for the school efforts. He tied many of the parents back to the university as well.

I think the university had a lot to do with this whole thing working the way that it did. So many of the Black parents worked at the university. I think they saw and heard and realized the impact that all of this (desegregation) would have on our society and our community. Overall, by nature of who lives here, we are a pretty well-educated community. Going to ball games and events at the university gave us opportunities to blend in with one another. This community is just a unique and special place. I think the university is just at the center of all that.

R4 brought a very similar perspective with regard to advocates for *Freedom of Choice*. He spoke very highly of the district level leadership and the parent group. R4 spent a great deal of time speaking of the respect he had for his first assistant



superintendent. He mentioned the way she handled her business was evidence that she was in the educational field for the right reasons, and that was to create the best learning environments for students. While he noted other names of specific people and particular efforts they may have made, he was very clear that this particular community was unique. Unique by the demographic—

...this town is full of very quiet leaders...as a part of this community you just come to understand that image is very important...there is an understanding that develops that it is important to project and protect a positive image...from the parents in their homes to the leaders in their offices, you just know it is important to do the right thing.

R4 also credited the Office of Civil Rights as an advocate. He felt like the purpose of that office was to “watch over and make sure” the law was carried out. He stated that having a “big brother watching over your shoulder from afar can be a good thing.” By this he explained that leaders knew what they had to do, and with this group watching from Atlanta, it just seemed like the Office of Civil Rights also quietly made sure things went the way they were supposed to go.

### **Obstacles in Implementing *Freedom of Choice***

As with most any major transition, it can be expected that obstacles will be present. The *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation efforts of this southern community were no exception. Based on the comments made by the participants, while the transition may not have been seamless, it was certainly better than many of the stories told from other communities. The obstacles recalled by the participants were few in

number, very isolated, and not consuming of the overall landscape associated with the *Freedom of Choice* endeavor as experienced by these participants.

A common theme was established from the perspectives of the participants in this study with regard to formal preparation or planning for the *Freedom of Choice* movement. The common theme was that there was little to no planning that they could recall. R1 emphasized that he had heard rumors that began to circulate about choice options. He shared that the rumors he had heard were just conversations about the possibility of desegregation that stemmed from conversations at the local barber shop and similar type places.

I do not remember ever having a faculty meeting or any kind of a formal meeting at school where we were told or even discussed integration. Now, we all knew what was going on around the country with the Civil Rights Movement, and we were very aware of the court orders to integrate, you know the *Brown versus Board* case from years earlier. We would sit around and talk about how it may happen here, speculate when it was going to happen here, and that type stuff. No one from the central office ever came to us and said this is what we are doing and why. When it did happen, it was just assumed that we were doing what the courts said we had to do. Like I said before, I guess being a coach, I got the news it was happening a little earlier than most because of that meeting we had at the central office to discuss the upcoming season and athletics.

R4 shared in a very similar manner the same type recollections as R1 about the lack of professional development or teacher preparation. To the best of his memory, no

formal discussions about how to respond or what to plan for ever took place in the early years of desegregation.

There was no professional development to speak of. All of the efforts made to allow students choice were just voluntary. I guess the thought process was if this is a voluntary thing for students, then there was no need to make teachers go to any kind of training for it. People just did what they had to do and carried on business as usual. Back then, even more so than now, discussing race was taboo. I think, in general, people were just afraid to talk about anything to do with race. There were some rocky times, and the Black and White people did have a little tension; in hindsight, some training would have probably been beneficial. Any trainings along the lines of diversity or understanding poverty came much later.

From the district perspective R2 did share brief comments about the time frame of the planning referencing the weekly Board of Education meetings for the first year of organizing the school system. R2 also mentioned a variety of informal community conversations that took place at ballparks, doctor offices, and social settings. He mentioned meeting with any parents who expressed interest in discussing the choice plan with him. One thing that R2 did not mention is his conversation was anything about training or development for the teachers to adapt to the *Freedom of Choice* plan.

Student, R6, recalled her teachers being more reserved to cover some topics. She said that she felt like some of the content in her classes may have been “watered down.” This could be related to the lack of professional development allowed for

teachers to be more prepared to deliver this type of content to a diverse population.

She remembered studying the Civil War and said,

I do remember the teacher shying away from the topic of slavery. We had talked about it before in earlier grades, but I remember the teacher avoiding questions about that topic and just moving quickly through that lesson. I guess it was because of the Black students in the room.

R1 recalled some obstacles that he felt could have been addressed. He reiterated the lack of professional development. He stated that, "Maybe some of the little things that did creep up could have been avoided with a more concentrated effort on the front end of the process." R1 emphasized that from his teacher perspective, while things did go well, he would have liked for there to have been more communication about expectations for dealing with diversity and the process as a whole.

R1 also referenced a major obstacle as being the culture of the South. Some obstacles existed just because of the way people thought. R1 shared,

...you know, sometimes people just create their issues. I remember some people fussing about the location of the school...people would say things like why do we have to send our kids to the White side of town? I thought to myself, why in the world are making an issue over something like that? You know, it is what it is, and that is where the school is located...it is not like we can just pick the building up and move it...The bus issue also came up sometimes in discussions. I guess it was the mentality that the White people were trying to take our smart kids...there was still some resentment in the Black community...I

often heard terms like across the tracks and the other side of town...We were one community to one degree, but still segregated in another degree...

Many obstacles existed throughout the United States with regard to desegregating public schools. It took many years to shift the culture to even make efforts to address the 1954 Court ruling that separate, but equal facilities were not legal. In 1966, at the same time the Courts ordered school districts not only to end segregation but to undo the harm segregation had caused by racially balancing their schools under federal guidelines, the school district officials of this research study underwent efforts to best meet the needs of the students they served. In many ways, the drive to end segregated education and to put Black and White children in the same classrooms was the most radical and potentially far-reaching aspect of the Civil Rights Movement. Such change was meant to alter the attitudes and socialization of children — beginning at the youngest ages — as well as end the inequality inherent in all “separate but equal” facilities, whether they were drinking fountains, public accommodations, or the schools.

### **Discovery**

In this section the researcher combines and interprets the voices of the participants and uses her own voice to narrate the discovery and interpretation of the data collected. This section begins by describing the commonalities and emergent themes. The following sections are outlined: the facilitating factors that led to *Freedom of Choice* implementation; the obstacles of the initiative; and the positive outcomes of the initiative.

The school system in this research was formed in 1961. While it was seven years after the historic *Brown v. Board* case by the time this system opened its doors, segregation was still the norm. Four years later, in 1965, as Governor Wallace was challenging federal guidelines for public school desegregation, this school system quietly submitted a plan that would use *Freedom of Choice* as a method for gradual desegregation of its schools. A number of key elements emerged from the data as factors that facilitated the quiet transition of this system.

### **Facilitating Factors**

An interesting finding in this research was that the factors that emerged as facilitating the success of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative in the 1960s are the same qualities being taught today by many experts as requirements for success (Collins, 2001; Elkenberry, 2007). These elements are: leadership, open communication, advocates, and stakeholder ownership.

### **Leadership**

Getting the right people in the right places first, then creating a vision for the organization through a “who first...then what” approach is essential element for successful organizations (Collins, 2001). Organizations do not change; rather the people within the organizations change (Elkenberry, 2007). These two leadership principles taught some forty years after the *Freedom of Choice* endeavors seem to exemplify one of the facilitating factors that emerged from this research data. Six out of the nine respondents directly related the successful desegregation efforts to some capacity of leadership. All nine of the respondents, at least indirectly, made a reference to someone in a leadership role as contributing positively to *Freedom of Choice*. R3

stated, “System leaders, especially principals, of desegregated schools must be risk takers to a certain degree...we had to be committed to this cause and place the goals of desegregation of our schools as a priority.” R2 remembered that Judge Johnson had said the plan for desegregation placed by the school district in this research before the Alabama Courts was, “The first one he had seen that truly had the best interest of the students in mind...that was a reflection of the leadership of the school system and the community.”

All three of the teachers who were interviewed referenced either a principal, assistant principal, or central office leader as being key a contributor. R4 referenced the support of district leadership. “We had a strong district level support. On the rare occasion an issue be taken to the next level, the superintendent would always redirect the problem or concern back to us at the school.” And thirdly, the administrators deferred the success of the initiative to the community as a whole, the university, and the families. R1 articulated that the influence of the local university was significant to the culture of the community. He said, “I strongly believe the university being the center of this community helped shape our culture and the dynamics here. With an overall educated community and an emphasis being placed on education, I think people here just understood what needed to be done (with regard to integration).” R9 further expounded the family influence noting *Freedom of Choice* as a dinner table conversation topic, “conversation would extend to home around the dinner table, and my parents and my grandparents were very much for it, and we used to talk about why it was important.”

Coaches were referenced as playing a vital role in allowing the smooth transitions on the athletic fields and competition courts to be a window into the schools for the community to see integration could work. One respondent articulated this point by saying, "I think sports really played a large role in getting the Blacks and Whites involved and working together." Another respondent emphasizing the role athletics played stated,

"It seemed as though that athletics played a dual role in the desegregation movement. Your average 'Joe' walking the street may not see or know what is going in the math classroom, but a whole lot more people know what takes place on the ball fields and the ball courts. Sports, in a way, was a public window to see if this (*Freedom of Choice*) was going to work with the Black students and the White students competing together and working together."

Whether it was through the simple act of a White media specialist sharing a book about a successful Black person with an isolated Black student, or a teacher allowing a student to explore an unknown culture without passing judgment, the actions of the teachers can be used to infer that their leadership did make an impact on the students.

Similarly, the teachers expressed praise for the administration. Leading by example and making a stand for policy and procedures that were believed to be right were noticed and appreciated. Leading by example was exemplified by Respondent 3,

"Your belief or non-belief will be reflected in the behavior you exhibit. If you believe in desegregation and act accordingly, the message will be clear. But, if you do not believe it or were to have seen it as just another burdensome federal intrusion, then that message would be equally clear."



The student interviews show a direct contribution of the teachers making a positive impact to the success. As an example, R9 shared the positive experiences she had making the transition by referencing her counselors; “I remember working with the counselors and how they tried to bridge this transition and try to make it a little bit smoother.” R6 remembered a teacher going out of her way to help a young Black student fit in by sharing a book with him about a successful Black man. R7 recalled how important the coaches were in helping to ensure that all students and athletes worked harmoniously on the field and off the field.

### **Culture of the Community**

Just as there were individuals in the schools who provided meaningful and positive leadership, the culture of the community itself helped to facilitate this change in the schools. The culture of the South was less than stable as it related to race relations. The state government was making a strong political stand against desegregation, yet the school officials of this community are credited with forging ahead in very quiet and structured manner to implement the expectations of the federal government to desegregate.

Referenced many times by the interviewed administrators were the influences that the community as a whole had on the *Freedom of Choice* implementation. The community was generally considered to be a well-educated town and a municipality that placed great importance on education—equitable education for all. Respondent 1 noted,

“...being a university town, I feel like that with a predominantly well-educated community the people just understood and saw the need to make this (integration) happen.”

Much of this influence is attributed to the local university which serves as the social center of the community and the largest employer in the area. As an outgrowth of the relatively large percentage of the educated community population, it may be deduced that the adults as both parents and contributing members of society recognized the need for the desegregation of the schools. They were aware of the national perspectives on equality and did not want their community to be labeled or portrayed in the media as a stereotypical southern town. Respondent 4 stated that he firmly believed “image and perception are very important to the people of this town.”

### **Communication**

People are persuaded not by what we say, but by what they understand. Further, great communication depends on two simple skills—*context*, which attunes a leader to the same frequency as his or her audience, and *delivery*, which allows a leader to phrase messages in a language the audience can understand (Maxwell, 2007). Although participants spoke about the lack of communication and planning on a systemic basis, the evidence was very clear that communication was a driving force in the success of the *Freedom of Choice* plan studied in this research. Eight of the nine respondents referenced communication while telling their stories. For example, R1 referenced being “called to the central office during the summer of 1965 to discuss the changes within athletics.” R2 recalled multiple informal conversations at “ballparks and doctor offices.” He also stated that he “made himself available to meet with any and all families who wished to come to his office to discuss the *Freedom of Choice* along with any concerns they have had.” While it may be noted that more communication in the form of professional development with faculty and staff, which did not appear to happen,

may have even more positively impacted this endeavor, it is clear that open and honest dialogue did take place.

Formal and informal communication efforts were referenced. Evidence included examples such as R9 noting family conversations about *Freedom of Choice* while sitting around the dinner table to R2 recalling formal meetings among elected officials. Participants recalled conversations about integration ranging from school employees having casual dialogue at ball parks, doctors' offices, and at church to school leaders being very open during the course of interviews with prospective applicants about the direction of the school system and the type of employee they were seeking.

All three stakeholder groups interviewed noted that they felt informed about the efforts that were taking place to varying degrees. Student responses from R6 and R7 seemed to be the least informed, garnering most of their information from their parents, school teachers, and the media. This is not a surprising finding given the ages of the participants at the time of the *Freedom of Choice* implementation. One student respondent eloquently said that he was more concerned "about playing ball and doing teenager stuff than he was about all the other." He just accepted it as a new way things were going to be and did not worry about it too much.

Teachers who were interviewed did note that there were some conversations which took place with some being in the form of formal meetings, while others said they got most of their information from casual conversations with peers. Administrators who were interviewed stressed that communication efforts were made from their level by both disseminating information and, equally important, listening to the concerns of stakeholders. As noted in the response of one central office leader during the initial

planning of the *Freedom of Choice*, weekly meetings took place with Board of Education members, as well as numerous meetings with the city council. The same respondent also described in detail how he invited every parent to his office and offered an individual conference with each family to address any concerns they may have regarding integration. The administrative respondent stated, "...I made a point to meet with any parent who wanted to discuss this issue with me. I met with someone almost every day about *Freedom of Choice* trying to answer questions."

The respondent also spoke of the informal conversations in which he engaged throughout town as the opportunity presented itself. Another administrator respondent stressed the "open and honest communication" he received during his interview for an assistant principal position in the system. He described in detail the forthrightness of the interview team about the direction of the system and the need to employ a Black administrator.

### **Community Ownership in the Initiative**

As previously stated, the community in this research is home to a large university that significantly impacts the demographics of the community. The evidence lends itself to infer education for all in an equitable manner was a priority to a majority people in this town. While segregation remained in many facets of life in the 1960s, a meticulous effort was made in this town to either create or enhance a positive image. According to the respondents, all nine of them, the general expectations established in most homes, by the civic leaders, from the school leadership were to create the best possible environment for all students while adhering to the letter of the law. As stated by R3, "the people in this town recognized segregation was wrong...it was not in the best

interest of anyone, and we had to take bold steps to do the right thing.” R6 reinforced this idea by stating, “We knew what was being said on the television and in the news. We knew what was happening in other places with the violence and all. That was not us; that was not what we were about.” It is reasoned that efforts made in this town were not done for attention or media coverage, efforts were not done in a purely reactive nature, efforts were not made out of spite; rather, the *Freedom of Choice* plan and eventual desegregation plan were constructed because the people knew it was the right thing to do.

All nine respondents referenced an understanding of the law and court rulings that impacted the call to desegregate schools. They also all acknowledged the state of Alabama, as well as all of the South, was extremely slow to take action. Respondent 9 emphasized, “Alabama was really slow to move on integration; after all, it was over ten years since the Brown case.” Separate facilities for Blacks and Whites had been ruled inherently unequal, and the respondents recognized this. The generalization was made from the data collected that this community had leaders in place who understood the shifting social culture and could make decisions to best meet the needs of the people here. Leaders were trusted. Leaders established enough communication that *Freedom of Choice* and eventual school desegregation happened with little fanfare and virtually no outside interference. Respondent 1 remembered, “Integration just happened here...there was no media coverage or fanfare of any kind.”

### **Positive Aspects of *Freedom of Choice***

The facilitating elements helped lead to a number of positive aspects which resulted from the *Freedom of Choice* endeavor. Among the factors consistently found

within the evidence are key entities who are referred to as in favor of, in support of, and highly recommending the *Freedom of Choice* plan within the framework of this research. Several individuals were referenced by name, two community organizations were implied to have been contributors, and a distinct group of people were all considered to be the proponents of this endeavor.

To protect anonymity, specific names are not used within the context of this research. However, due to the significant emphasis placed on the importance of the work by the respondents, it is necessary to refer to these by people by title so due diligence can be given to record the role they played. Both, the first and second superintendents of this school system were credited with being influential in the smooth implementation of the *Freedom of Choice* plan and desegregation. Their leadership abilities were referenced by five of the nine respondents: all three teachers and two fellow administrators. An assistant superintendent was credited by one administrator interviewed as an inspiring force due to her uncanny ability to communicate openly and honestly. One respondent kindly remembered, "I would have followed her anywhere if I could have. I just did not want to ask my family to move again. She was a great lady."

The university located within the center of this community is the largest employer within the county. The employees of the university are generally well-educated and compared to other communities in the South, the community members within this research are relatively more informed to make important decisions. The decision to move forward with a *Freedom of Choice* plan with little attention is one such decision. The public school system employees had the opportunity to observe and learn from the integration efforts at the university. R4 recalled the first Black student enrolling at the

local university in 1964. “(He) first tried to enroll in 1963 and had to get some help from the courts. Being told what to do by the courts did not seem to go over very well in this town. Image seemed to be important.” R4 further stated, “It was a slow process there too...I think the (public school leaders) learned from that.”

A second organization referenced in the limited literature and historical documents was the local churches. Surprisingly, only one interview respondent mentioned the influence of the churches on this process. Local church pastors would make available the church buildings for meetings. They would also advocate for White students and Black students to meet together in a safe social setting such as church. A female student respondent referenced meetings established at her church on several occasions to prepare for the school integration. She recalled, “I do remember having some of the meetings at my church. There would be some parents, not many, school counselors, and both Black and White students.” Parents, school counselors, and students were all invited to attend.

The final influential group that emerged consistently from the evidence was the positive influence that came from the homes of this community. Parents were credited by all three respondent groups as having a strong impact of the success of the *Freedom of Choice* implementation. R1 recalled, “Parents seem to have better influence then than they do now...there seemed to be a stronger focus on the family dynamic.” The family dynamic from both White and Black races was referenced as being strong. From conversations taking place at the evening dinner table to the high moral expectations placed on children by parents, the family unit was referenced as being strong and influential. Parents in this community are credited with having high expectations for

their children and understanding the need for equity while at the same time enforcing accountability for all.

### **Negative Aspects of *Freedom of Choice***

Equality cannot be recognized without displeasing some. In other words, it was necessary to understand that while all students are entitled to equal opportunities and protection from discrimination, changes from established routines must take place.

There were negative aspects of the *Freedom of Choice* experience noted in the data. Examples of such negative aspects are noted in the following section.

There was little movement in the initial *Freedom of Choice* year due to several factors. One such factor may have been a fear of the unknown. As previously noted, only five Black high school students opted to transfer the first year. No information could be found which promoted the idea that a lot of information or encouragement was disseminated among the younger grades. A few factors relative to the lack of participation in younger grades were noted by the participants. One was a sibling issue. It was referenced by one respondent that families would not allow one sibling to transfer schools while keeping one at the assigned schools. The limited grade level options may have also been a hindrance in this regard as the original *Freedom of Choice* plan only allowed for choice in grades 1, 7, 11, and 12.

Along with the fear of the unknown, participants referenced a greater concern for younger children than the older ones who were better prepared to take care of themselves. It was noted by three respondents that more issues seem to take place with regard to discipline, name calling, and slurs at the younger grades. This was attributed to the maturity level of the students. R6 remembered,



There were some issues of name calling. Based on the comments made by the three student respondents, it was deduced that they were getting most of their information about integration from home and the media. Many conversations and perspectives were formed around the violence portrayed in other communities such as Little Rock, Arkansas, and Tuskegee, Alabama, where desegregation efforts involved violence or highly publicized issues. It was mostly just ignored, and it seemed to stop.

### **Physical Space Issues**

Documentation throughout this research revealed that only five Black high school students opted to transfer in the inaugural year of *Freedom of Choice*. Five students transferring from one school to another did not cause significant physical plant concerns. According to Board minutes from July 26, 1966, prior to the second year of *Freedom of Choice*, the local Board of Education was also beginning to see challenges with accommodating their growing student population. A restructuring of grade levels housed within schools was noted in the minutes of the July 26 meeting. The Board minutes reflect that schools were considered to be all inclusive with one school housing 483 students in grades one through six; three schools housing grades one through four with student populations of 249, 529, and 315 respectively; and one school housing only grades five and six for 116 students. The minutes reflected that choice requests in grades one through six would be granted conditionally based on availability of space. All first choice requests were granted in grades seven through twelve.

As space issues continued to be a concern for the growing school system, the June 7, 1967, Board minutes further reflect an additional action to address this concern.

Due to overcrowding issues, a maximum number of requests per grade were instilled to alleviate future problems.

### **Culture of the South**

One major hindrance of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative that is inferred from the evidence is the strong segregationist culture deeply rooted in the South. While efforts were being made by the leaders of this community to uphold the mandates of the Courts and the federal government, much resistance to desegregation was still prevalent from the state government. While former Governor George Wallace was no longer in office, his wife, Lurleen Burns Wallace, was elected as Alabama's first female governor and continued her husband's former agenda. This segregationist agenda was evidenced in the September 6, 1967, Board minutes. The school superintendent read a letter to the Board of Education and was advised to seek legal counsel before responding. Governor Lurleen Wallace sent a letter requesting data to support the 'Teacher Choice Bill; Act 295' be sent to her office. This was a bill introduced to the legislature which allowed for parents to have the right to choose the race of their child's teacher. No evidence was found to indicate a response from the school system, nor was evidence found to indicate the bill ever became law. However, these facts can be used as an example of the unstable culture of the state.

### **Lack of Acceptance**

While it was garnered the overall implementation the school system's *Freedom of Choice* plan went smoothly, it was also evident that there were obstacles encountered along the way. Respondents shared multiple examples of events and actions that presented stumbling blocks along the way throughout this endeavor. Six of the nine

respondents recalled specific disciplinary events ranging from name calling to large physical confrontations. As example, R6 recalled, “We had a few more fights at school.” R1 recounted an incident at the former Black high school spring dance.

The students at the Black high school were having their spring dance. I think it was called May Night or something like that. There was a large fight that night at the dance. Some of the Black kids who had opted to go to the former White high school came over and tried to blend in at the dance. Some students from the Black high school did not like the fact that these guys had come back over to this school just to dance and party with them. The students from the Black school felt like this was their dance and those other guys thought they were too good or more important since they left for another high school.

R9 told of an encounter at her locker. “I remember one boy coming up one day to my locker, and he just ranted all kinds of things, and he didn’t want me there, and y’all need to go back to your school.” R1 specifically recalled, “Most of the issues we had were minor and just due to immaturity...some of the same issues still exist today as far as younger people saying insensitive things without thinking.”

One administrator recalled the immaturity of some middle school aged students who struggled with the transition. He referenced some name calling and racial slurs that had been addressed. Another administrator referenced a “testing of the waters” as he called it, referring to a group of young Black students who pushed the boundaries on going to class in a timely fashion. He recalled the issue was promptly handled as he gained the support of the young people’s parents, and no further incident occurred.

## **Perceptions**

With the segregationist culture so prevalent in the South, there were many preconceived ideas which also presented obstacles. One respondent clearly noted that he felt like many people had prejudiced views about certain things just because of the way things had always been. He noted that it took time for those preconceived ideas to change. Specifically, he spoke of the idea that some felt the school system would only let the “best” Black students transfer or that the school system would transfer the “best” Black teachers. Another respondent added there was the idea that the curriculum would have to change or be “watered down” for the Black students.

The evidence presented by one respondent, who served as an administrator, was compelling – that the idea of the curriculum being changed was more than just a perception. He felt very strongly in saying that he believes the curriculum issue still exists today. His account outlined that Black students perform with less proficiency today on standardized tests than do their White counterparts. He also said that just as much so now as back then, an individual could walk through any hallway and look at the race of the students in the room and pick out which were the advanced level classes and which ones were not, inferring that the classrooms of majority White students were the advanced ones.

## **Outcomes**

From a review of primary source documents and interview responses, as well as the researcher having lived and served in this community for over two decades, the conclusion can be made that the school system studied in this research is one in which almost everyone—parents, teachers, and students themselves—have high expectations

for success. The question for most students in these schools is not whether they will have a chance to go to college, but which college they will attend. With high expectations come high standards. The norms set for student achievement are high, and shoddy work will not pass muster. Disadvantaged students placed in these settings also learn nonacademic lessons in how to “negotiate the system” and to succeed in American society.

Along with high standards and expectations, the schools in this study usually command ample resources—curricular materials, smaller class sizes, and, most important of all, good teachers. Further, the parents demand accountability from their public schools. All nine respondents in this research detailed in a variety of capacities the expectation equity: equity with regard to resources, opportunities, and facilities.

### **Positive Outcomes**

An example of equity being sought can be seen in multiple examples. Not only did the school system leadership provide the opportunity for families to have choice of school beginning in 1965, they also continued to listen to the concerns of the Black families who opted not to change schools. As five students transferred in 1965 to the former White high school, a larger number of Black students who chose to stay at their assigned school staged a demonstration calling for upgrades to the Black high school. In January 1966, sixty-six high school students organized a protest seeking upgrades to their school. Inadequate heating, poor restroom facilities, and limited school resources were items needing to be addressed. The school system responded to these concerns and outlined a plan to address facility upgrades. A two-year plan was put in to place to

renovate and expand that campus. Eventually, the former Black high school became a middle school for students in the system.

A recognition of the efforts being made by this school system to provide equitable experiences for all students was noted in the dialogue of three respondents, in particular. One of the teachers interviewed shared that one the most powerful stories she recalled in all of her years of service was a simple exchange of words one afternoon. She fondly recalled a memory of an elderly Black lady taking the time to simply say “thank you” to a young White teacher who made the decision to come to the former Black elementary school. The teacher shared that simple gesture impacted her greatly for her entire career and reinforced that she had become a teacher for the right reasons. She wanted to make an impact on all children, regardless of race or background. This story is significant as it implies a general appreciation for the efforts made.

Referenced by both a teacher/coach and a student was the importance athletics played in projecting such a positive image on the choice plans and integration. The eventual outcome that is generalized from these findings is that athletics projected the perception that Blacks and Whites could get along and work together. Very few community members have a chance to walk the halls of a school or to observe the day-to-day interactions within a classroom. However, much of the public can see and choose to participate in athletic events. When the Black and White students were seen competing together, and the Black and White coaches were seen working together, a very strong image was set in the community. Athletics was a metaphorical window for the community to see into the schools and know that these two groups of people who

had been perceived by many as different, could indeed blend harmoniously. One respondent stated it this way.

...it seemed as though that athletics played a dual role in the desegregation movement. Your average 'Joe' walking the street may not see or know what is going in the math classroom, but a whole lot more people know what takes place on the ball fields and the ball courts. Sports, in a way, was a public window to see if this (*Freedom of Choice*) was going to work with the Black students and the White students competing together and working together.

It was also noted by all nine respondents that *Freedom of Choice* led to a tremendous cultural and social learning experience for many people. Evidence indicated that most of society was still segregated in the mid-1960s. Some segregation was by choice and some was by habit. Nevertheless, many stories were shared outlining that the *Freedom of Choice* efforts which led to desegregation awarded many opportunities for friendships to be formed, to increase cultural awareness, and alleviation of fears to take place. Outcomes were noted in stories from two student respondents sharing that lifelong friendships were made with people from another race which may have never happened otherwise. Teachers shared stories of their students exploring unknown entities to them at the time with things as simple as the feel of skin or hair from a person of another race. Many respondents mentioned fear and apprehension. As humans we tend to be creatures of habit. There was a fear of the unknown. One teacher respondent stated, "We were all a little unsure. I mean, we had seen the terrible reactions in other places when integration was attempted. I guess we all were a little skeptical in the back of our minds." Certainly, the media portrayal of

violence and chaos in other communities who had tried to integrate fed the anxiety of the people in this community. It may be inferred that as an outcome of this fear, in the first year of the school choice option, only five Black high school students had the courage to request a change of school. The option was also available to first grade and seventh grade students in 1965, but no students in these age groups made the choice to change schools.

### **Unintentional or Negative Outcomes**

Noted in a strong manner by one of the Black administrators interviewed was the regret that even today the hopeful outcome of *Freedom of Choice* has still not been achieved. The perception was presented that *Freedom of Choice* opened the way for eliminating the appearance of a racially segregated school system, but has not eliminated racial discrimination. Further, it was inferred that we have a continued form of segregation within a desegregated school. Disproportionate numbers of Black children in advanced academic classes, disproportionate numbers of Black student office discipline referrals, an inadequate number of Black teachers and administrators were all concerns cited. Statements were made referencing that students still generally even sit in the cafeteria with friends of a similar race.

Despite the efforts made to desegregate and increase assistance for all students, data shows that there remain persistent gaps in achievement. Whites chose exclusively to attend the segregated schools they had been attending, and Blacks who thought about choosing a formerly White school often faced the fear of White hostility, economic and physical retaliation, and harassment. If they made no choice, they were assigned to the previously segregated schools. While few issues occurred within the community



of this research, there are those who believe the true intent of integration has been missed.

Student respondents noted they felt curriculum may have been taught differently in some areas than in the past. Sensitive areas, such as slavery, were avoided. Another student respondent noted that it seemed as though the Black students may have lost their identity. By this, the implication was made that as the Black students transitioned to the former White school, those Black students who were or may have been leaders in their previous school just seemed to blend in and not have the same leadership impact in the new school. Administrators noted that some teachers did opt to leave as the choice plan was initiated. However, it was clearly recalled that while a minimal number of teachers may have left the system or field all together, there were ample qualified candidates who wanted to teach in this system.

### **Summary**

Many recognize value in an integrated education for their children, but they also quite properly view integration as merely one component of a quality education. The *Freedom of Choice* plan was a first step in this school system's efforts toward overcoming a barrier in the struggle for racial equality. There were some negative aspects to the endeavor and obstacles to its success. Overall, however; the evidence appears to reflect that due diligence was given to this effort, and by most all accounts the efforts were made in good faith to meet the letter and intent of the law with regard to desegregation. A summary of the findings is shown in Table 2, and a timeline of the events is shown in Table 3.

Table 2

*Summary of the Findings*

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Perceived Aspects of *Freedom of Choice* from Data Collected

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Positive Aspects

1. Brought the community closer together
2. Allowed for new cultural experiences
3. Allowed for new friendships and relationships to be formed
4. Enhanced appreciation of extra-curricular activities (athletics)
5. Allowed for new learning experiences
6. Caring and capable teachers emerged
7. Equitable opportunities for all

Negative Aspects

1. Some racial disciplinary issues occurred
2. Slow process to create movement
3. Feelings of loneliness and isolation existed
4. A small number of teachers chose to leave the field
5. Immaturity and racial slurs made by students
6. Perceived lowering of the standards by some

Facilitating Factors

1. Strong community and school leadership
2. Caring and capable teachers
3. Extensive planning by the leadership
4. University influence and perceived well-educated community
5. Community ownership in the process
6. Athletics serving as a “window” for the community to see success

Obstacles and Hindrances

1. Lack of professional development with faculty
2. Culture of the state of Alabama as a whole
3. State government
4. Fear of the unknown based on experiences from similar efforts in other communities

Table 3

*Timeline of Events*

<b>DATE</b>	<b>EVENT</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>
1896	Plessy v. Ferguson	Separate, but equal
1938	<i>Gaines v. Canada</i>	Allowed black students to attend a Missouri law school
1950	<i>Sweatt v. Painter</i>	Allowed black students to attend a white law school in Texas
October 1951	Brown v. Board case filed	Eventually lead case as one of five
May 1954	Supreme Court Ruling Brown v. BoE	Overturn Plessy v. Ferguson
May 1955	Brown II	All deliberate speed
December 1955	Montgomery Bus Boycott	State Climate
September 1957	Little Rock, AK	Violent desegregation effort
1958 - 1959	Virginia Resistance	Norfolk and Prince Edward
May 1959	Local Referendum	Vote to form new school system
May 1961	Freedom Riders began	National Climate/ <b>State violence</b>
October 1961	Local Taxes Raised	Pay for new school system
September 1962	New system splits from former system	New school system formed
October 1962	New school system opens doors	

June 1963	UA event with Gov. Wallace	State climate
July 1963	Lee v. Macon filed	Beginning of eventual state court mandate
September 1963	Tuskegee Integration Effort	State climate
September 1963	16 <sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church	State climate/bomb
March 1965	Selma Voting March	State Climate
May 1965	Compliance plan	Freedom of Choice
June 1965	5 black students attend local formerly all white high	1 <sup>st</sup> integration
January 1966	66 students protest condition of the local former black high school	Renovations
July 1966	Student enrollment caps discussed at Board meeting	Growth
March 1967	Lee v. Macon	Court ordered desegregation
Summer 1968	Local desegregation plan approved by Judge Johnson	Extension of original Freedom of Choice
1970-1971	Full integration in the local school system	

The researcher sought to provide a recorded history of this experience from the perspectives of the educators and students involved in the process. The research is meant to record a missing part of the history and to honor the work that was done during the first several years of the desegregation era of a particular school system. While the data collected reflects many more positive outcomes than negative ones, the recorded history does leave questions to be still be considered. The next chapter seeks to address some of these questions and provide avenues for addressing them.

## CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the process of implementing a *Freedom of Choice* initiative by a school system in east Alabama from 1965 to 1970. The study examined this experience from the perspectives of the students, teachers, and administrators involved. It was meant to provide a recorded history of their experiences and honor the work that was done. Another intention of the research was to use the information gleaned to help deal with the issues of integration and the blending of cultures in today's society. A third purpose was to foster additional studies of similar initiatives.

An historical case study approach was implemented for this research. Evidence was collected from a variety of sources including: semi-structured interviews with nine participants, review of primary source documents, and a review of related literature.

Themes emerged from the data collection process, and those themes were used to develop the analysis and discovery categories in Chapter 4 of this study. In this chapter, the researcher summarizes the major findings, presents implications for practice, discusses the findings related to the conceptual framework, and proposes recommendations for further research.

### **Overview of the *Freedom of Choice* Initiative and Findings**

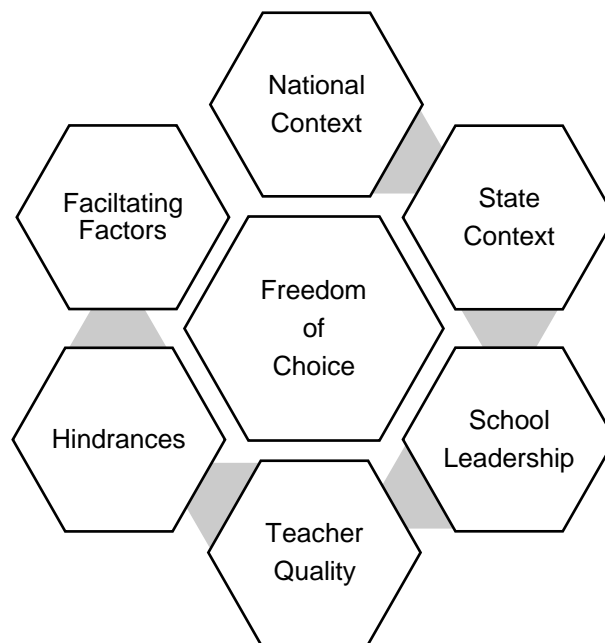
This school system implemented a *Freedom of Choice* plan in May 1965 which allowed all students in grades 1, 7, 11, and 12 the opportunity to select the school within the district that they would like to attend. This plan, while solid with intent, enacted very

little movement of students in its initial year of existence. Only five Black high school students from the over 2000 total students opted to transfer from their assigned school, and no White students opted to move.

As the community members alleviated fears, the reluctance shifted in the subsequent years, and more students began to transition through the choice model. In 1968 the school system officials presented a desegregation plan to the Courts that would have full desegregation implemented for the 1970–1971 school year.

*Freedom of Choice* evolved in the community associated with this research in a relatively quiet and calm manner when compared to many other communities across the southern United States. In this community, findings suggest that several factors facilitated the successful implementation of the *Freedom of Choice* Plan. These factors included strong school system leadership, open and honest communication, and a well-educated community guided by strong family values. Positive outcomes from the *Freedom of Choice* initiative included a relatively uneventful desegregation endeavor over a five year period, a strong support of the school system by local stakeholders, an effective use of all school facilities, and a more culturally diverse society. Other outcomes which might be considered negative included a perception by some stakeholders that the curriculum may have been slightly altered, some minor disciplinary incidents that were directly related to race issues, and some young people feeling ostracized. Also considered negative were the perceptions that professional development related to diversity was lacking and a perception that the true intent of desegregation was not, and still has not been, met.

The five research questions were used as the guiding premise for data collection throughout this study. The findings for each of the five research questions are briefly discussed in this section along with their relevance to the conceptual framework. The following model was presented to represent the conceptual framework as related to this study. Figure 2 represents an original creation by the researcher based on the literature. The intention of this diagram was to visually represent aspects of the *Freedom of Choice* endeavor as it related to the community which was used in the beginning of this study to develop questions and begin the research process.



*Figure 2. Original Conceptual Framework Model*

***Question 1: What are the perceptions of why the Freedom of Choice program was begun and how it operated?***

The evidence clearly indicates several key factors that promoted the launch and implementation of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative. The 1954 Brown v. Board case and



the 1964 Civil Rights Act along with the related cases in the intermittent time frame outlined the rationale for public school desegregation. The stakeholders saw the need to devise a plan to meet the intent of laws written to provide equitable opportunities for school children. From the framework model, it can be inferred that National Context and School Leadership were the dominant forces that precipitated a *Freedom of Choice* initiative. An added piece of the framework could be considered in this section that represents local community context.

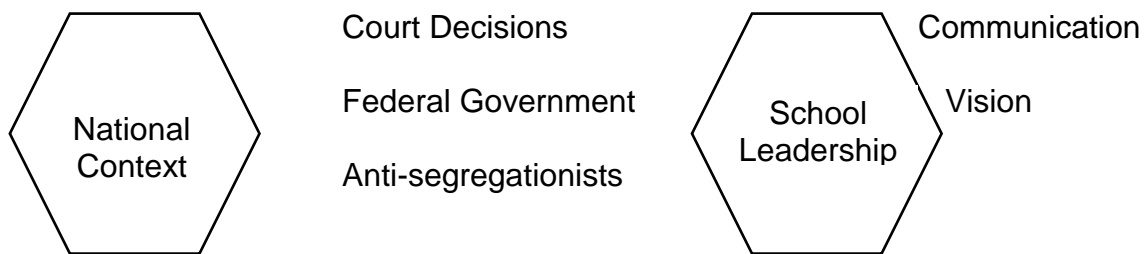


Figure 3. Framework of How Freedom of Choice Began

### Facilitative Factors

Leadership, open communication, advocates, and stakeholder ownership are four of the identified elements that facilitated the implementation of the *Freedom of Choice* Plan. These factors were the themes that emerged from the data collection. The local school leadership and community leadership were able to visualize, energize, and finalize a plan that remained focused on doing what was right for all students. While the culture within the South was one that was generalized as segregationist, the efforts being made by the federal government, the courts, and implementation efforts across the country were aligned with the efforts being made in the community in which

this research occurred. The evidence indicated that the relatively well-educated community made efforts to protect a positive image and design a plan that could promote integration of the public schools with little controversy.

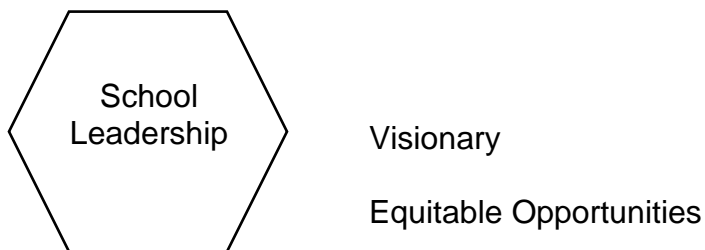
Communication strategies were implemented to allow opportunity, not only for information of the *Freedom of Choice* plan to be disseminated, but also equally important structures were in place to allow stakeholders to voice concerns and ask questions. Both formal and informal communications were noted. Hallinger and Heck (2010) found that collaborative leadership was a relevant factor when trying to initiate change in schools. These findings support that research outcome. Leaders participating as a part of the team and allowing others input helps to facilitate removing barriers to success that may be present. The evidence indicates this practice was in place.

A considerable amount of evidence referenced that the respondents had an understanding of the law and court rulings that impacted the call to desegregate schools. Along with the school leadership, other advocates who helped foster the *Freedom of Choice* included the influence of the people from the local university, the local church groups, and the parents of school aged children.

***Question 2: What are considered the positive aspects of Freedom of Choice?***

*Freedom of Choice* efforts led to desegregation which awarded many opportunities for friendships to be formed, cultural awareness, and alleviation of fears to take place. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, this effort fostered the pathway to allowing access to equitable opportunities for all students, regardless of race. Creating schools that were all inclusive and open to all students was the most beneficial

outcome. School leadership was an important piece that directly relates to the culture of the local community studied in this research.



*Figure 4. Framework of the Positive Aspects of Freedom of Choice*

High standards and expectations in education require solid resources to be provided. Resources in the forms of materials, physical environment, and most importantly, effective people—good administrators and teachers are critical elements. The evidence reflected one of the most positive aspects of the *Freedom of Choice* efforts in this town was to ensure these elements were available to all students. There were opportunities to upgrade existing facilities, as well as build new facilities to accommodate growth as detailed in the 1965 and 1966 Board of Education minutes. These documented renovations and building projects enhanced the physical environments as well as helped with space issues.

More evident as a positive aspect of this effort was the manner in which the school leadership and teachers impacted the *Freedom of Choice* Plan. The planning and implementation were executed by the school leadership and were recognized by the stakeholders of the school system. The teaching staff carried out their responsibilities in a professional manner. The evidence indicated that the teachers placed the needs of students at the forefront of the decision-making. Efforts were made

by the school system employees to provide equitable experiences for all students, regardless of race or location as to where the students chose to go to school. Teachers were commended by parents and community members for making students feel welcomed and important. Coaches of the various athletic teams were commended for making the sports such a visible aspect of how well the integration efforts took place.

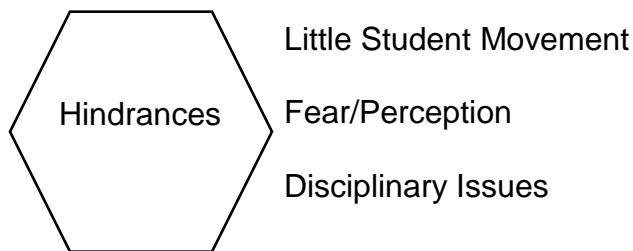
Finally, the friendships and relationships that were formed may be the most beneficial long-term aspect of this endeavor. Multiple accounts of friendships being formed were shared by the participants. From the student perspectives, as well as from the adult perspectives, many relationships were forged with people of another race that would have never happened were it not for the *Freedom of Choice* initiative taking place when it did in this community.

Due to the culture of the South, many people were not given the opportunity or simply chose not to engage with people of another race. *Freedom of Choice* metaphorically opened the door for many people to alleviate fears to grow socially by having interactions with people of another race. Education has been, and continues to be, a priority in the community chosen for this research.

***Question 3: What are considered the negative aspects of Freedom of Choice?***

There were documented aspects of the *Freedom of Choice* initiative that presented challenges. Obstacles are typically present with any type of major change or mindset shift; this particular event was no exception. Negative aspects were framed within the evidence in varied capacities. Negative issues which emerged from the data included little movement of students when given school choice, minor disciplinary

events, fear of the unknown, and a perception of a continued segregated society within the walls of an integrated school.



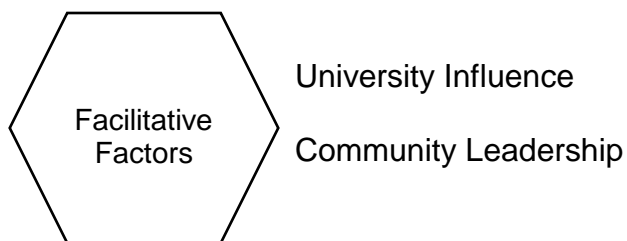
*Figure 5. Framework of the Negative Aspects of Freedom of Choice*

During the initial implementation of *Freedom of Choice* very few students opted to change schools. In fact, the evidence reflected that only five Black students opted to transfer to the former White high school. No students in younger grades opted to transfer, and no White students opted to attend the former Black high school. Data indicated that there was little movement due to concern some had about the uncertainty of the *Freedom of Choice* Plan. As noted throughout the accounts of the respondents, there was an awareness of other communities that had made similar desegregation efforts and had encountered significant violence and resistance. Communities in nearby counties had experienced great difficulty in attempting to desegregate their schools. This, along with a general understanding of the violence in Arkansas schools, the closing of Virginia schools, and the other issues in the media surrounding race relations, created a great deal of apprehension as to whether the *Freedom of Choice* plan would actually work in this community.

As expected, there were some disciplinary issues with students noted in the evidence. Fortunately, there seemed to be no major incident, nor was there any media attention brought to this community. The *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation plan evolved with little fanfare. Some of the incidents recalled involved name calling and immaturity. Administrators recalled a couple of noteworthy events including a fight at a school dance and an insubordination issue with several students, but no disciplinary events that were not addressed at the school level. Students interviewed did share experiences in which they noted some disciplinary issues, but no event shared was uncommon from behaviors still observed today.

**Question 4: What factors are perceived as facilitating the success of the Freedom of Choice initiative?**

The evidence revealed several facilitating factors that led to the successful implementation of *Freedom of Choice*. As outlined throughout the findings, school leadership, quality teachers, community engagement, and the university influence all played key roles. The community in this research is home to a large university that significantly impacts the demographics of the town. There seemed to be a general expectation that importance be placed on education and equitable opportunities for all.



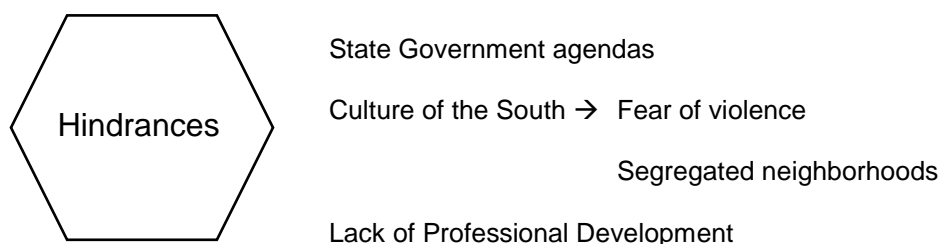
*Figure 6. Framework of the Facilitative Factors of Freedom of Choice*

A majority of the research on school desegregation has focused on many of the short-term effects such as achievement, self-esteem, and intergroup relations of students in segregated schools. This study sought to identify elements that facilitated the success of *Freedom of Choice* and desegregation in one specific community. This town, located in the heart of the deep South, revealed evidence which seemed to indicate that while many of the same segregated societal practices that existed in the 1960s were prevalent, perhaps the general attitude about desegregation in this town may have been atypical from the majority perception of the South. The influence of the university impacted the demographics of the town. A larger percentage of well-educated people lived in the community than in most towns in Alabama. Being a better educated community led to more informed decisions being made.

As outlined in Research Question 1, a number of facilitating factors were identified when describing “how *Freedom of Choice* happened” that are also considered to be relevant to this research question. The visionary leadership of both the city and the school leaders was critical. These leaders saw the need for change to best serve students and to align with the direction of the federal government. The leadership clearly communicated the vision and took the necessary steps to implement a change. The change was successful, not because the leadership just said to make it happen, rather it was successful because the community members believed in the effort and perceived it to be the right thing to do for children as outlined by the participants in this research.

***Question 5: What factors are perceived as hindering the Freedom of Choice initiative?***

Upon review of the data, a major factor emerged as a perceived hindrance to the *Freedom of Choice* initiative in this research: the segregationist culture of the South. The hindrance component of the conceptual framework may be further visualized with the following components added.



*Figure 7. Framework of the Hindrances of Freedom of Choice*

According to Orfield and Yuhn (1999) the South has always had the highest proportion of Black students. The eleven states of the old Confederacy had over 25% of the nation's Black students. They further stated that since the proportion of Black to White students was highest in the South, the integration efforts were more intense. The community within the context of this research had a very similar racial demographic to that as referenced by Orfield and Yuhn. Unfortunately, the state of Alabama had created a sense of segregation that was not only accepted by most, it was promoted by the state government. During the 1960s both Governor George Wallace and Governor Lurleen Wallace were elected to office by promoting a segregationist agenda. The majority of the state accepted a segregated belief that was contrary to that of the federal government and courts which was one for racial equality and equal opportunity for all.



Political maneuvers across the state by elected officials created a sense of reservation to move forward with any desegregation efforts such as *Freedom of Choice*. The grandstanding efforts of Governor George Wallace at the University of Alabama and in the town of Tuskegee are just two examples of the state government's attempts to prevent integration.

Another factor of hindrance was the residential segregation. It is difficult to generalize about demographic trends, but it may be concluded that residential segregation played a role in the slow implementation of *Freedom of Choice*. Although it is documented that the community in this research was relatively well-educated, it is also noted that the community was segregated residentially. One respondent clearly stated that there was concern about the new high school "being built on the White side of town." In order to have a completely integrated city, many people would have had to change their place of residence. The neighborhoods, city blocks, and cul-de-sacs of this community were not equally representative of the racial demographics in the 1960s, nor are they today.

A third hindrance which emerged from the findings was the lack of professional development provided to the teachers related to the significant culture change that was taking place at the time of *Freedom of Choice*. Teacher comments outlined in the interview data revealed that the *Freedom of Choice* Plan was implemented without any prior notification or professional training to prepare for the changing dynamic of their classrooms. The evidence from the participating teachers in this research also revealed that the *Freedom of Choice* Plan could have been more efficiently communicated to the teachers, and professional development on the front end would have been beneficial.

## **Implications**

This section addresses the issue of how this research on the implementation of a *Freedom of Choice* plan can further the understanding of a community's effort to integrate public schools in a responsible and effective manner. The stories told by the research participants share a unique perspective that adds to the understanding of implementing an integration plan. The findings revealed some consistencies with other research in this field of study such as some common barriers and obstacles which existed. This study also outlined some characteristics that may be specific to the community of this research including a core community value of education and strong leadership groups who understood and emphasized the need for an equitable education for all.

### **Theoretical Implications**

While not explicitly defined in the data, the researcher can draw the conclusion that the success of this *Freedom of Choice* plan, and eventual desegregation of public schools in this community, was tied to the organizational change that took place as a result of the vision created by the school and community leadership. Supporting literature defines successful organizational change in a manner that is consistent with the findings in this research. Piderit (2000) noted successful organizational adaptation is reliant on generating support and enthusiasm for proposed changes rather than merely overcoming resistance. It may be implied that the community support of educational equity and the vision of the school leadership garnered the necessary enthusiasm for this *Freedom of Choice* plan to work. Further, Tushman and O' Reilly (2013) state that cultural change may be shaped by participation and commitment of the

participants. Tushman and O' Reilly also stated that change is more binding when participants have less external pressure to participate, when there is a public perception formed, and participation is not a democratic process. The *Freedom of Choice* plan outlined in this study models this line of thought outlined by Tushman and O' Reilly.

One of the most compelling findings from the research was a comment made by Respondent 2. He told of how the *Freedom of Choice* plan devised by the school leadership of this community was presented to the State Courts once desegregation plans became mandatory in the state. He vividly recalled Judge Johnson saying, "...this plan is the best I have seen to date that truly has the students' best interest in mind." It can be implied that the spirit of the vision in this community did lead to an organizational change. The spirit was one of moral purpose to do what was right. Fullan (2001) addresses moral purpose as a key component to successful change.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings from this study revealed practical applications worthy of future consideration with regard to schools and school systems as they address challenges of new generations. As society evolves and demographics continually change, a number of factors have been identified in this research as worthy elements to place focus upon as school systems adapt to meet the needs of their students. Elements that may facilitate a successful endeavor, as well as obstacles that may present hindrances to an effort, emerged from this research.

**Facilitating change.** It is leadership that envisions future direction, aligns resources, and motivates people toward a common purpose (McGuire, 2003). As outlined in the findings of this research study, the strong leadership with a common

purpose emerged as a facilitating factor to the successful implementation of the *Freedom of Choice* Plan. School leaders, community leaders, and family leaders played a critical role in the implementation of the *Freedom of Choice* Plan in the community associated with this research. A component of leadership that emerged from the findings indicated that there was a collaborative effort being made to foster integrated schools. There seemed to be an unspoken trust that the *Freedom of Choice* Plan was being initiated and implemented for the right reasons. Trust among the participants was garnered through common purpose. Wheatley (2014) noted that strong, effective relationships are based on trust. She further stated, “People organize to accomplish more, not less” (p. 340).

While only a very small sample size was utilized for this research, it did appear from the respondents that another key to facilitating change was the ability to understand the culture of the community. When moving forward with a large initiative such as the *Freedom of Choice* Plan, it is important to know that participants are positive about it. A common purpose is developed when people are working together from a common set of beliefs. The leaders, as the ones in this research, must be aware of the culture, beliefs, and norms of their community. Sergiovanni (2000) writes, “Leadership that counts is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connection with other people” (p. 270). Further explained in the literature by Fullan (2001) is the concept that people who can effectively lead change do so with a moral purpose or a sense of social responsibility to others.

**Potential barriers to consider.** One important hindrance to the *Freedom of Choice* Plan outlined in this research was the lack of professional development and teacher training prior to its implementation. All three teachers indicated in their responses that they wished there had been more communication about expectations and diversity training provided. Guskey (2002) emphasized that high quality professional development is a central component for improving educational settings.

Also emerging from the data was the perceived lack of communication to the teachers regarding the *Freedom of Choice* Plan. Evidence indicated that efforts were made to discuss and plan the implementation of *Freedom of Choice* among the leadership. Evidence also indicated that efforts were made from the perspectives of the administrators who participated in this research to openly discuss the plan with state leaders, city leaders, and community members. From the perspectives of the participating teachers, it seemed that little or no formal communication about the *Freedom of Choice* plan could be noted. The literature supports the idea of communication among all parties as being essential. Fullan (2002) suggested a strong connection between foundational communication and successfully achieving an organization's goals.

## **Conclusions**

As the initial conceptual framework is examined at the conclusion of this research, the researcher analyzed to determine if this framework from the original intent of the study aligned with the findings or if the framework should be amended. The original framework was set to outline how a community used knowledge and experiences observed from other communities to make informed decisions as how to

best serve students and implement a *Freedom of Choice* plan. The degree to which the national and state events regarding the Civil Rights movement impacted the decision-making of local school leaders was a piece of evidence examined through this framework. Furthermore, the relationship between the school leadership and the teachers had to be examined. It was determined after the review of evidence and careful analysis of the interview data that the framework does partially represent variables associated with the *Freedom of Choice* initiative in the community of this research. However, one addition could be added to the model in the form of “local context.” The evidence revealed that the unique dynamics in this community may be atypical of many other Southern towns. Due, in part, to the large emphasis that the local university has on the community, there seemed to be a more welcoming approach to desegregation. Perhaps, the influence was a result of a larger percentage of the population than surrounding communities being well educated; thus, in turn, the community as a whole made equitable education for all a priority. As previously noted, the conceptual framework included six elements as noted below which were used to engage the research process.

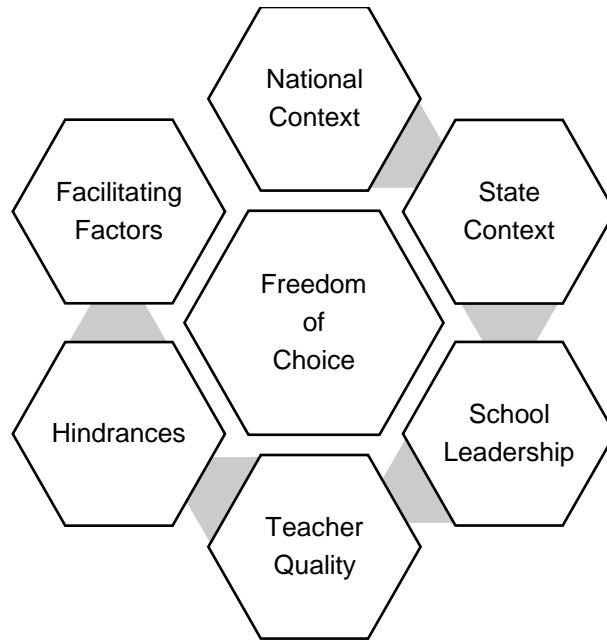


Figure 8. Original Conceptual Framework

A more accurate representation of the conceptual framework may be represented by the following visual created by the researcher. This graphic is used to visually represent the key components relative to one community's *Freedom of Choice* plan at the conclusion of the research.

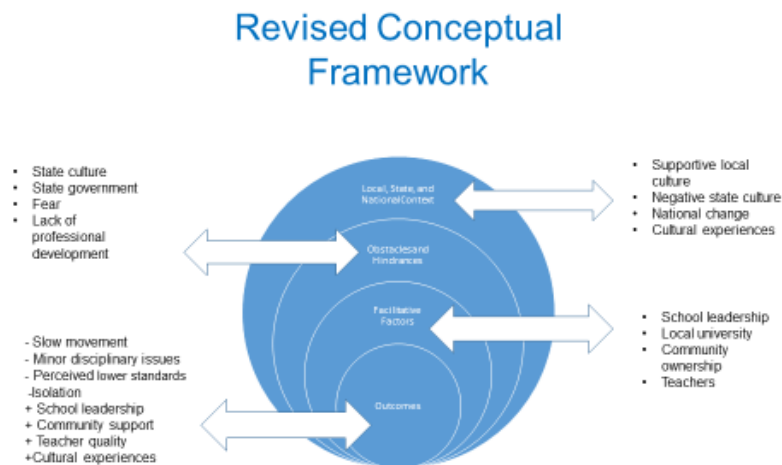


Figure 9. Revised Conceptual Framework

## **Research Implications**

The researcher was able to collect descriptive data that was used to provide a detailed narrative from the perspective of the participants. However, only a limited generalization and interpretation can be garnered from the small sample size of nine participants. One implication of this research is that this study lends itself to further investigation. Additional studies may be completed by replicating this work to expand the body of knowledge relevant to the *Freedom of Choice* plan in this community.

The study could be further expanded by examining in greater detail the perspectives of the various stakeholder groups: students, teachers, parents, siblings, and administrators. One limitation to this effort would be time. As the actual participants continue to age, the ability to locate them increases in difficulty. Additionally, the ability to clearly recall the events and perceptions may begin to diminish as the participants continue to age. As of the date of this report, a high school aged student at the time of the inception of *Freedom of Choice* would now be in the range of 65-years old.

## **Further Considerations for Future Research**

From the findings and analysis of this research, a number of potential research opportunities exist. As the specific stories of the *Freedom of Choice* efforts were collected from the participants in one southern town, the implications for this research and the continuation of the study seemed to broaden. Several topics emerged as areas for consideration.



One area was the importance of leadership when addressing societal issues. A key facilitating factor identified in this research was the critical role leadership plays when addressing organizational change. Having a vision, being able to communicate with various audiences, and developing and implementing a strategic plan were facilitating factors that were a part of the successful endeavors in the *Freedom of Choice* initiative. One recommendation for future research would be to study specific leaders who have successfully implemented integration plans. To expand on the leadership, it may also be considered to study how communities have changed as integration plans have diverse people working closely together.

A second area of consideration would be the relevance of professional development and pre-planning for stakeholders as it relates to the implementation of new ideas. The evidence revealed that there was little or no professional development related to cultural diversity or race relations with regard to the participants of this study. It is recommended that further research be completed on the benefits of staff training and professional development as it relates to the success of an organizational change.

A third area identified as a future research consideration is the process for recruitment and retention of Black teachers and school leaders. Respondents indicated that there do not seem to be enough Black leaders in our schools. It is recommended that future research examine the representation of different races in teaching roles and school leadership roles. Included in the recommendation is to also examine the structures in place for recruitment and retention of all races in the educational field.

A final recommendation for further research would be to study the impact that desegregation efforts have had on society and particularly public schools. Was the

intent of the efforts made in the 1960s and 1970s to desegregate public schools actually fulfilled? It is recommended to analyze the schools today and determine if we have desegregated in full or if we continue to have cyclical issues with regard to race relations. A comparison of student populations related to academic achievement, office discipline referrals, attendance, and social interactions is recommended.

### **Closing Statement**

This study has identified the overall outcomes, facilitating factors, and the hindrances of successfully implementing a *Freedom of Choice* initiative in an Alabama community. It is hoped that the information gleaned from within this study will share a story from the voices of the participants that was prior to this research an untold story. The *Freedom of Choice* initiative fosters the idea that each student is entitled to equal opportunity and deserves a choice in the path of his or her education. Thus, it is vital that this story be recorded and used for future research to ensure that we continue to make the needed efforts to provide the best educational experiences that we can for all students. The one constant in our society is that society continually changes. It is imperative that we learn from our past as we move into our future.

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## Appendix 1



The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 4/14/14 to 4/17/15  
Protocol # 13-151 EP 1304

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY**  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

**INFORMED CONSENT**

for a Research Study entitled

"School Desegregation: Teachers' Perceptions of a Freedom of Choice Initiative in the South"

**What will be involved if you participate?** If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to agree to answer interview questions and recall your experiences as a participant in the Freedom of Choice Phase of Integration of the Auburn City Schools. The interview process will be a guided interview based on an arranged location and an established format. Your privacy will be protected. The interview will be taped by digital recorder, transcribed, and each tape will be coded. The tapes will be heard only by the principal investigator, doctoral candidate Cristen P. Herring, and the transcriber. Your total time commitment will be approximately one hour.

**Are there any risks or discomforts?** There are no foreseen risks associated with this study. All information will be kept confidential. Information will be reported in an anonymous manner and no identifiable information will be used.

**Are there any benefits to yourself or others?** If you participate in this study, you can expect to contribute to the knowledge of the desegregation process and historical context of the Auburn City Schools which has blossomed in the areas of academic achievement, athletics, and racial harmony since its watershed year of 1971. Although there will be no direct benefit to you, you can expect the data generated will help to provide descriptive stories and information that will serve as roadmaps for other current historical transitions of various races and ideologies whether voluntary or mandated.

**Will you receive compensation for participating?** If you decide to participate, there will be no compensation given.

**Are there any costs?** If you decide to participate, there is no associated cost.

Participant's initials \_\_\_\_\_

Page 1 of 2

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**If you change your mind about participating,** you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Educational Foundations Leadership and Technology.

**Your privacy will be protected.** Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. There will be no identification tags attached to any participant of this study. Furthermore, in addition to the data remaining confidential by the researcher, as a participant one must agree not to speak of any information attained during the course of this study including the revealing of other participants and subject matters discussed. Information collected through your participation may only be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, book and/or presented at a professional conference/meeting. By consenting to participate in this study you give the research permission to maintain transcripts indefinitely for future research opportunities stated above.

**If you have questions** about this study, please ask them now or contact Cristen Pratt Herring at 334-524-6171 or via email at [cmp0004@auburn.edu](mailto:cmp0004@auburn.edu). You may also contact Dr. Frances Kochan at 334-844-4460. A copy of this document will be given to you to keep.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334) 844-5966 or e-mail at [husbjec@auburn.edu](mailto:husbjec@auburn.edu) or [IRBChair@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBChair@auburn.edu).

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator receiving consent signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix 2

