

ONE

The Resistance to Equal Opportunity and Efficiency

IN NOVEMBER 1955, the Sumter County Grand Jury appointed Jimmy Carter to the Sumter County Board of Education, beginning a political career that would span twenty-six years. Although this rural area of Georgia was far from Washington, D.C., the *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954 and 1955) decisions had changed the mission of the board and the state's role in education. From these decisions, which declared "segregation inherently unequal" and mandated the end of racial discrimination in public schools "with all deliberate speed," Carter learned that fear could frustrate efficiency and that the illusion of equality could replace equal educational opportunity. How the state and local resistance to desegregation averted his efforts to reform education in Sumter County requires an understanding of the southern social and political milieu of the 1940s and 1950s and the issues facing local school boards in the wake of the *Brown* decision.

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

For most of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party was the only active political party in the South and segregation was firmly entrenched in the political structure of the southern states. Only whites voted in elections, and the winner of the Democratic primary typically became governor. Among the key campaign issues in nearly every election was white supremacy—an issue that often paved the road to political office. As V. O. Key explains, "In its grand outlines the politics of the South revolves around the position of the Negro."¹ In this political environment, white politicians and educational officials dismissed the need of African Americans for an education.

Throughout the South, schools reflected the social and political environment surrounding them. In urban areas like Atlanta, African American students had access to school facilities and materials similar to those provided to white students, although seldom new or in the same quantity. In rural areas, such as Sumter County where Jimmy Carter lived, white children attended school in buildings designated for that purpose with adequate materials to support the limited curriculum the rural districts could afford. The black children, however, typically only attended school between harvest and planting seasons and went to school in community churches so that the local board could avoid providing transportation or buildings. African American teachers were often overloaded with students and just as often lacked the necessary materials to teach them.² Although the United States Supreme Court had justified separate facilities for black and white Americans with the “separate but equal” doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), separate was the only part of the phrase most southern policymakers acknowledged—until the threat of desegregation and the desire to attract industry made equalization more attractive.

In the late 1940s, the poor conditions of the schools in Georgia concerned both the relatively small segment of the white population interested in economic growth and the even larger segment that wished to maintain segregation. Earlier in the decade, the Legal Defense Fund for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had begun a series of court cases concerning higher education and teacher pay to prove that racially segregated schools were unequal. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist, published *An American Dilemma*, a two-volume work on the “mistreatment and evident hatred of the Negro” in the United States.³ This work shed light on the deplorable conditions that black children and their teachers endured in their schools and their communities.

In response to the mounting pressure, the Georgia General Assembly turned to one of the tools used by proponents of efficiency and appointed a committee to survey the public schools in 1946. The survey confirmed the existence of racial and geographic differences in public school funding and recommended that the state provide the necessary assistance for the equalization of Georgia’s schools. In 1949, the General Assembly passed the Minimum Foundation Program for Education (MFPE), which incorporated many of the recommendations from the survey. This legislative package distributed more state funds to poorer districts to compensate for lower local revenues. It also included raises for teachers, both black and white, a building program, transportation for all county district students, and a 180-day minimum school year. Through this educational reform legislation, the General Assembly not only addressed the needs of African American students, but also those of rural white students.⁴ Such a massive equalization program, of course, required a tax increase.

With these state-funded improvements came more state supervision. In the past, when the State Board of Education had made funds available for a nine-month school year for black children, some county boards had not requested the funds because of the seasonable absences of the black children.⁵ The MFPE was a way to offer both black and white children in rural areas an equal educational opportunity, but it was up to the state government to mandate equal schooling for both black and white students—and to enforce it. Unfortunately, many doubted, with good reason, the will of the state to equalize educational opportunity. For example, Richard O. Johnson, a professor of education at Atlanta University, described MFPE as a “non-discriminatory basis for allocating state funds for education to local districts with certain guarantees that these funds would be spent on a racially non-discriminatory basis by local school boards.” Despite the nondiscriminatory design of the program, he questioned whether it could in fact “provide for the removal of the wide differentials which existed in educational opportunities between the races which had been built up by a policy of rank discrimination against Negroes.”⁶

As Johnson pointed out, although state leaders used the language of equalization in MFPE, they could not so easily rectify the history of discriminatory policies. The “equal” part of “separate but equal” would not be specifically addressed until August 1949 when the NAACP of Irwin County, Georgia, and parents of black school-age children filed suit over inequality in education. The parents claimed that the white school facilities were more valuable and that white teachers received higher salaries than black teachers. The suit demanded that the school board equalize the educational facilities and materials as well as teacher salaries and benefits. Although the suit did not demand desegregation of the public schools, the governor of Georgia, Herman Talmadge, denounced it, claiming that the NAACP was attempting to place “Negro children into the nearest most convenient white schools.”⁷ A year later, the NAACP and 200 black students in the Atlanta Public School District filed *Aaron v. Cook*, which demanded either the equalization of schools for black children or the admission of black children to the schools traditionally reserved for white children.⁸ This case, with its ultimatum to equalize educational facilities or allow desegregation, added to the urgency of funding MFPE.

Events outside of Georgia also pushed the General Assembly to increase state funding. Two Supreme Court decisions in June 1950, *Sweatt v. Painter*, which desegregated the University of Texas Law School, and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma*, which opened the University of Oklahoma graduate programs to African American students, alarmed southern segregationists.⁹ Talmadge spoke for many white politicians when he responded, “As long as I am Governor, Negroes will not be admitted to white schools.”¹⁰ Despite his strong rhetoric of resistance, Talmadge used the pressures for equalization from both

internal and external sources to push the legislature to raise taxes and support the equalization of schools in Georgia.

The legislative package, however, came with a price potentially higher than the necessary increased taxes. Spurred by the cracks in the wall of segregation, the General Assembly attached a condition to the appropriation bill. In reaction to *Aaron v. Cook*, the General Assembly passed legislation to cut state funding for any public school intended for white students that admitted a black student. The same consequence would occur if a black student attended one of the white institutions within the university system.¹¹ If the public educational institutions in Georgia could not remain segregated, then they would be closed.

By the opening of the legislative session in 1953, the idea of replacing the public school system with a private one gathered strength. In an address to both chambers of the legislature, Governor Talmadge declared that Georgians were in “grave danger” and a plan had to be prepared. The danger was the *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* case on the Supreme Court docket. A private school plan would be a means to maintain segregated schools in the event of a “calamitous decision.”¹² Talmadge’s administration began to move toward the creation of a constitutional way to fund private schools in case of desegregation. It was in this tense environment that Jimmy Carter resigned from the navy and moved his family to Plains, Georgia, for “a potentially fuller opportunity for varied public service.”¹³

EQUALIZATION AND RESISTANCE

When Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter returned to Sumter County in 1953, following his tour of duty with the U.S. Navy, theirs was a stereotypical 1950s middle-class white family. They had three children and actively participated in the life of the community. Jimmy focused on building the seed business his father had started, joining community organizations like the Lions Club and the hospital planning board, and teaching Sunday School at the Plains Baptist Church. His activities were those of a young man building a business and becoming known in his community. Rosalynn managed their domestic life and eventually the bookkeeping, billing, and posting of sales for their growing businesses.¹⁴ While her activities at the seed warehouse were not stereotypical for a 1950s housewife, they reflected the Carters’ moderate views on social issues such as women’s rights and race.

Jimmy Carter also differed from many of his neighbors in his approach to solving problems. As a naval officer assigned to submarines and under the command of Admiral Hyman Rickover, he routinely studied manuals and took courses to earn promotions and learn about his assignments. Through Admiral Rickover, he learned to be efficient in his work and to have high expectations for himself. He brought these experiences in effi-

ciency and excellence home with him and used them to learn about the farming business, which had changed dramatically since he had worked with his father as a teenager. Taking courses through the county extension agency of the University of Georgia, Carter learned new farming techniques and business practices that he shared with his customers, especially those who were poor.¹⁵

Because of their experiences in the navy, both Jimmy and Rosalynn considered themselves moderates in their beliefs about desegregation. During Carter's tour of duty, President Harry Truman had ordered the navy and all the other armed services desegregated. Truman also called for drastic changes nationally through a host of federal initiatives, including a ban on poll taxes, the desegregation of accommodations for interstate travel, the creation of a federal civil rights commission, and legislation making lynching a federal offense.¹⁶ The federal legislation pertaining to the armed forces allowed black servicemen to serve in the same capacity as white servicemen and, through his contact with them, Lieutenant Carter began to question the segregated social and political structure of the South.

The Carters had been in Plains less than a year when the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision. Rosalynn Carter recalled,

Jimmy was listening to the radio when the boys and I walked into the office the day of the decision. He worried about the reaction among our neighbors. "I don't know what's going to happen around here," he said. Then we watched as little knots of people began to congregate on the sidewalks, in the stores. And for some time—not only in Plains, but across the South—wherever two or more were gathered, integration was the primary and, more often than not, heated topic of conversation.¹⁷

Her memories of that day in May and her classification of herself and her husband as moderates on racial issues gave the impression that they supported the desegregation of the schools. However, she also recounted the social pressure they felt not to support the *Brown* decision. "There were few people with whom Jimmy and I could talk openly about the issue. I could count them on two hands—the liberals in the community." They did not consider themselves liberals at the time, but rather "realists" who knew that "desegregation was a foregone conclusion." What they wanted was to find a way to desegregate the schools "in the least harmful way" for their children.¹⁸

In November 1955, the county grand jury, the governing body for the county, appointed Jimmy Carter to the board of education. James "Earl" Carter Sr. had served on the board for more than ten years. The younger Carter, literally taking his father's seat, remained on the board until January 1963, when he resigned to serve in the Georgia state senate. His appointment to the school board could have thrust Carter and his family into the middle of the growing controversy over desegregation. The Sumter

County board, however, focused on the equalization of facilities for black students and ignored the issue of desegregation until the county schools desegregated in 1964.¹⁹

As a school board member, Carter witnessed the inequalities between black and white schools and the backlash of the white community in response to the state legislature's clumsy equalization attempts. After he joined the board, matters pertaining to educational efficiency—consolidation, planning, testing, and surveys—became more prominent on the agenda of the Sumter County Board of Education. He remained silent, however, about his opinions on desegregation. In the Georgia of the 1950s, equity consisted of equalizing facilities and expanding access to programs. While Carter served on the board, it completed a building program to upgrade the educational facilities for black students and established a classroom for white children with special needs. Yet, despite the *Brown* decision, the schools in Sumter County remained segregated.

Two events occurred soon after Carter joined the board that brought his attention to the discrimination that black children in the county district suffered. One concerned the conditions of the schools that served the black community and the other their transportation to and from school. At his second board meeting, Carter suggested that the board members visit all the schools under their supervision. According to Carter, the visits to the two high schools and three elementary schools for white children went well. The board members were proud of the achievement of the students and felt that the facilities were adequate.²⁰

The schools provided for the African American children in the county, however, embarrassed the board members. W. W. Foy, the county superintendent, described the conditions at those facilities: "We had . . . five fair, and I just say 'fair,' elementary schools for [black] children in the county. And then we had about thirty-two or three, one and two teacher schools in churches."²¹ The one- and two-teacher schools held in churches were "firetraps" with "potbellied heaters in the middle of the building, and on cold days, everybody would crowd up next to them."²² Carter remembered that "classes were held in various places, including the Sunday school classrooms of black churches and even private homes." His most vivid memory of the visits was of "large teenage boys trying to sit on chairs designed for children of kindergarten age."²³ The tours stopped before the board members had seen all the sites serving African American students.

The state had approved a new building program to provide safe schools for the African American children before Carter joined the board. It provided four new elementary schools and a high school, but it placed the schools in central locations and required the county to provide buses to transport the children. Carter wrote that he "was actually a member of the county school board for several months before it dawned on [him] that white chil-

dren rode buses to their schools and black children still walked to theirs!”²⁴ The minutes of his first meeting, however, reflected that the education committee of the county government met with the board members to discuss the transportation of black students. The legislature had funded transportation for black students for 1955, and the county committee recommended “adequate transportation be provided as early as possible.”²⁵ Nevertheless, the board postponed making a decision on the purchase of buses until the completion of the new schools two years later.²⁶

Although the board initiated planning the new elementary schools in 1953, opposition over their placement developed when construction of the buildings began. Leslie, a town about the size of Plains that had an elementary school and one of the high schools for white children, was selected as a location for one of the new elementary schools. However, once construction began “about twelve citizens” objected to the placement of the school because “the children, both white and black, would have to travel the same streets and roads in order to reach their respective schools.”²⁷ The board members argued that the waterlines had already been placed on the property and would be expensive to move. After further discussion, the board decided to move the school “to avoid the possibility of future trouble between colored and white people in the communities.”²⁸ Carter made the motion to notify the state about the opposition of the white citizens and the reluctance of the board “to locate the Negro school building in the wrong place so that friction might arise later.”²⁹ The protesters from Leslie agreed to pay for moving the waterlines. Within two weeks, however, the board received notice that the state had denied its request. At the next meeting, Carter made a second motion rescinding his first one to move the elementary school.³⁰

The irony of the protest was that the black and white children in rural areas often lived in close proximity. Thus, the protest may have been more about the school than about the children walking on the same roads. Although Carter’s actions appear to support the prejudice of the white citizens more than the needs of the African American children under his supervision, he may have believed that the protesters from Leslie would be overruled once the township received the estimate for moving the waterlines. He and the other board members may also have wanted to simply keep civil peace. As Rosalynn Carter explained, both she and her husband sought to prevent harm to their children, and he may have believed that the black elementary schoolchildren would have borne the burden if the board had insisted on keeping the school at the planned location.

The building program continued to completion without further protest from the white residents of Sumter County, but did not succeed in creating equal facilities for the black population. The board built a high school for the black students near the county seat of Americus and consolidated the many one- and two-teacher schools into four buildings spread

throughout the county, but the number of students per elementary school classroom was almost double that of the white schools. Furthermore, the new schools were furnished with used materials handed down from the schools for white children.³¹

While the board pursued the building program, it also addressed requirements of students with special needs. None of the districts surrounding Sumter County had a special education classroom and County Superintendent W. W. Foy believed it was important to serve this population of students. The discussion that led to the establishment of the classroom for exceptional children centered on the personal memories of the board members. Most remembered that older boys who were “slow” had started the fires in the morning and cleaned the erasers. Because these boys could not perform academic tasks on the level of their peers, teachers assigned them menial chores. Foy believed that the board needed to create a special class for these students so that they could be productive once they left school.³²

The main obstacle to establishing the class was that a special education teacher was beyond the number of teachers allotted by the state. To designate a special education classroom and hire a teacher, the board would have to pay for it out of local funds. Carter supported Foy’s proposal and, on May 1, 1956, made a motion for the “use of a classroom . . . for a teacher of exceptional children, if it is not needed for the regular school program.”³³ Although the board had to use local funds for the extra teacher, Foy believed that Carter’s sense of fairness brought his support for the classroom. His sense of fairness, however, was limited. The board made no effort to use local funds to establish a classroom for exceptional black students.

As the board addressed equal educational opportunity by building schools and creating classes for students ignored in the past, the language of scientific management began to appear in its minutes. From 1957 on, terms like intelligence tests, standards, studies, and surveys appeared with increasing frequency. These topics were also discussed in the *School Board Journal*, which the board members had access to as members of the American School Board Association. In July 1957, the board requested that Superintendent Foy “investigate the possibility of a testing program for the schools.”³⁴ Four months later, the board voted to purchase “IQ Tests . . . as a beginning for a county wide testing program.”³⁵ The following year, Foy was “instructed to put into effect a complete placement testing program during the coming school year for all grades from the 4th grade up in all county schools.”³⁶ To support the use of the tests, Carter made a motion to pay the expenses for five teachers, one from each school, to attend a workshop on testing in Macon, Georgia.³⁷ At the time of his motion, there were ten schools in Sumter County, three elementary and two high schools for white students, and four elementary and one high school for black students. It is likely that only white teachers attended the workshop.

In the summer of 1958, the board changed the standards for promotion in the county schools and the grading scale to raise academic standards. For elementary grade promotion (grades 1–8), students could only have one failing grade unless the student had already repeated the grade. In those cases, the teacher might “advance the pupil to the next grade if the teacher believes it to be the best interest of the pupil; whether or not the pupil passes the required work.”³⁸ High school standards specified the number of units for promotion and graduation. As with the elementary students, after a student had spent a year in the same grade, the principal had the discretion to advance the student.

The grading scale for fourth through twelfth grades had been a ten-point scale with 59 percent representing a failing grade; the new standards established a seven-point scale: A = 100–93, B = 92–85, C = 84–77, D = 76–70, E = 69–65 with 64 and below considered failing. The E grade was a failing grade with the privilege of making up examinations at the discretion of the teacher.³⁹ By changing the scale, the board could claim that it had raised academic standards without additional costs or changes in teaching methods or curriculum. Of course, the burden for meeting these new standards fell completely on the students.

Nationally, the debates in education focused on the threat of the Soviet Union and its space program. After the launch of the Soviet Union’s satellite Sputnik in 1957, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) to support instruction in science and mathematics. In rural Georgia, NDEA meant that districts could apply for federal grants to purchase laboratory equipment to update their curriculum. The Sumter County high schools offered only business math, algebra I and II, and plane geometry. Science courses were limited to general science, biology, chemistry, and physics. The biology and chemistry labs were substandard in the high schools for white students and unfurnished in the new high school for black students.⁴⁰ In its discussion of the grants, the board decided to apply for \$1,500 and split it between the high school for black students and the two for white students. With approval from the state department of education to use capital funds to match the federal monies, they applied for funds to purchase science equipment.⁴¹

Once the funds were awarded, the board decided to use the majority of the \$1,500 in the two high schools for white students and to apply for more funds for the high school for black students. Despite the funding acquired under NDEA, the high schools for white students still could not offer the higher level science and mathematics courses that had become the norm in larger urban high schools. The inability of the board to provide the advanced courses for the white students, much less laboratory equipment for the black students, began to convince Jimmy Carter that the county needed to consolidate its school system with that of the wealthier city, Americus. Before the

two boards could pursue a merger, however, resistance to desegregation in the area substantially increased and created new barriers for this act of administrative efficiency.

Resistance to the *Brown* decision took the form of private school amendments in many southern states. Georgia's version became law six months after the *Brown* decision, when the Georgia legislature passed bills that would close the public schools in the case of desegregation. Following what he believed to be the leadership of then Senator Herman Talmadge, gubernatorial candidate Ernest Vandiver pledged, "Neither my child nor yours will ever attend an integrated school during my administration—no, not one."⁴² His statement was in response to the continuing desegregation case, *Aaron v. Cook*, that challenged the segregated status of the Atlanta school district.⁴³ After Vandiver won the election, Senator Hermann Talmadge summoned the governor-elect to his home in Lovejoy, Georgia. There in the presence of several black community leaders, Talmadge informed Vandiver that he "would be responsible for desegregating the public schools."⁴⁴ Although he had promised white Georgians that the schools would remain segregated, Vandiver now was responsible for finding a peaceful means to accomplish desegregation.

His opportunity to fulfill Talmadge's charge came in the form of a court order for the Atlanta Board of Education to submit a desegregation plan by the end of January 1960. Vandiver called for the legislature to create a citizens commission to hold hearings in all ten congressional districts to allow citizens to voice their opinions on desegregation. He intended the commission to accomplish two things: to allow the public "to blow off the steam of their frustrations" and "to carefully study their alternatives."⁴⁵ John Sibley, a prominent Atlanta attorney, agreed to serve as the chair of the commission, which was later known by his name. Sibley interpreted his charge as asking white Georgians (although black Georgians also testified) to decide how much, if any, desegregation of the public schools was acceptable. Very deliberately, Sibley focused his questions on two options: to allow local school boards to decide whether to desegregate on a limited basis or to maintain segregation even if the public schools had to be closed. On March 3, 1960, the commission held its first hearing in Americus, near the Carters' home in Plains. Sibley began here because of the large African American population and the potential for white resistance. All of those who spoke at the hearing supported the continuation of segregation, even if it meant closing the public schools.⁴⁶

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter attended the hearing and heard their neighbors support the closing of the public schools. Although he was a member of the Sumter County Board of Education, he was silent at the hearing. Neither Jimmy nor Rosalynn Carter explained their silence in their memoirs, but it may have been that he was not invited to speak or that he disagreed with the majority of his neighbors. Whatever the reason, he did not speak at the hear-

ing, and the Sumter County School Board remained silent in its minutes on the issue of segregation and desegregation.⁴⁷

The Sibley Commission continued its meetings around the state. The testimony at each one mirrored the percentage of the black population in that area: where black citizens were the majority, the whites who spoke at the hearings supported segregation at any cost, and where white citizens were the majority, the white speakers supported local desegregation decisions. The majority report issued at the end of the hearings favored changing state laws to allow each school district to decide how it would cope with desegregation. The commission also released a minority report, which received very little press, supporting the continuation of segregation and the Private School Amendment, even if it meant closing the public schools. After these reports were released, the federal judge presiding over *Aaron v. Cook* issued an order for the desegregation of the Atlanta public schools to begin in May 1961.⁴⁸

Three months after the Sibley Commission held its first hearing in Americus, Jimmy Carter became the chair of the Sumter County School Board, although he was the youngest and probably the most moderate member. This position did little to encourage Carter to voice his private feelings about the desegregation of the schools. The unanimity in the testimony during the hearings told him the sentiments of his neighbors.

At the first meeting he chaired, Carter faced a potentially explosive situation. At the meeting the month before, the board decided not to renew the contract of William Powell, an African American math teacher, because they had received a report from the State Security Office that he participated “in certain meetings and activities undesirable to [the] board and community,” but had tabled further discussion until it had “complete information on him.”⁴⁹ The evidence presented was a “report and a picture of a colored woman . . . from the State Security Office.” The issue was whether Powell had associated with members of NAACP or not. At the next meeting, which Carter chaired, the board decided that Powell was innocent of the charges and renewed his contract “upon the recommendation of the principal.”⁵⁰ Because of the involvement of the State Security Office and the heightened community awareness from the Sibley Commission hearings, the board faced few repercussions from dismissing Powell, but could have faced an investigation for renewing his contract in the tense political climate of the times.

In its resistance to desegregation, the governor’s office had created the State Security Office to investigate potentially subversive organizations and individuals, bypassing the official investigative offices of the state. At the top of the State Security Office’s list was the NAACP. During the 1950s, the attorney general of Georgia had investigated the state branch of the NAACP as a subversive organization.⁵¹ Although no charges were brought, many white community leaders in Georgia (and elsewhere) viewed the NAACP, and other organizations that promoted the integration of the schools, as subversive. The

charges against Powell were vague, but both black and white teachers understood that membership in or even open sympathy with organizations like the NAACP could cost them their jobs.⁵²

RESISTANCE TO EFFICIENCY

Increasing services to the Sumter County students was the focus of Carter's leadership of the board. In preparation, he read reports written by John Gardner, president of the Carnegie Corporation, and James B. Conant, former president of Harvard University, on improving American high schools. Gardner published reports in 1958 and 1960, which addressed excellence and equity in education.⁵³ In the second study, *Excellence*, he asserted that the United States needed talented and motivated students to meet future social, political, and economic demands. The sorting of these students in a democracy, however, had to be tempered by the necessary balance between excellence in achievement and equality of opportunity. In his description of the barriers to equal opportunity, Gardner explained, "Many bright young people do not continue their schooling; others are ill-trained. Too high a proportion of Negro children grow up in circumstances which are such as to smother talent rather than to nourish it. We make wholly inadequate use of the talents of women in our society."⁵⁴ For the United States to reach excellence, these injustices had to be rectified.

James B. Conant's study, also sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, supported the creation of comprehensive high schools through the consolidation of schools of less than 1,000 students, or with fewer than 100 students in the senior class, to support a broader curriculum and more services. He also suggested a standard curriculum for all students and advanced classes in science, mathematics, and foreign languages for talented ones—both boys and girls.⁵⁵ The two high schools for white students in Sumter County had around 411 students combined, and the city high school had around 600 students.⁵⁶ The only way that the county white students could have the curriculum suggested by Conant and the equality of opportunity Gardner proposed would be to combine the two districts.

Over the next two years, the state department of education did two surveys of the county to promote the consolidation of county and city districts. Outside events, however, complicated the issue of consolidation; as the two boards pushed for a single high school for white students, desegregation became a reality in Georgia. These events would intertwine, much to Carter's surprise, resulting in the failure of measures designed to expand the services available to the white students across Sumter County.

The Georgia Department of Education completed the first survey, which was of only the county district, in late 1960. At a special meeting of the board, Chairman Carter explained the results of the survey to the principals

of the white schools. The state department of education recommended the consolidation of the two high schools for white students. The projected school population was 425 students with fifteen to eighteen classrooms and an expanded curriculum that included electives.⁵⁷ He stressed that the board intended to build the high school to offer more classes to the students in the county, not to move it toward desegregation. However, the ability of the county to support the construction of the new high school was in question. At the next board meeting, the members decided to discuss the recommendations of the county survey with the Americus board.⁵⁸

Carter chaired the joint meeting and a representative of each board presented the existing conditions of his district. Local taxes only supported 12 percent of the funding for the Sumter County schools, while 24 to 25 percent of Americus school funding came from local taxes. The city district was overloaded with 370 students more than it could accommodate, and it needed thirteen more classrooms to adequately house them. Sumter County suffered from the opposite problem. Only 411 students attended the two high schools for white students. The small student body divided into two schools prevented the board from providing many electives or curriculum alternatives for students. Because state funding was based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA), the more students were dispersed around the county, the fewer teachers the county district could afford to hire. The solution to the problems that both the city and the county districts faced was to consolidate the districts and construct a single high school for white students. In anticipation of the decision, the city superintendent had requested a second survey from the state department of education that would include both the county and the city districts to establish the "best type of system for the county as a whole."⁵⁹ While the survey would include many numbers about the students and the existing schools, it would omit the prevailing political climate in Georgia and the opposition of the county residents.

As Carter led the county and city districts in discussions about increasing services through consolidation, the desegregation of the public schools in Georgia became a reality. Before the 1961 session of the General Assembly met in January, a state representative called for the repeal of the Private School Amendment that would close the public schools if desegregation occurred. His proposal supported the Sibley Commission's majority report by creating a freedom of choice plan alongside the existing tuition grants for private schools to allow parents to choose the school that their children would attend in districts where a final court order demanded desegregation.⁶⁰ It would also keep the Atlanta public schools open after the implementation of the desegregation order in May 1961.

Within a week of the publication of the proposal, the state's laws closing the public schools in case of court-ordered desegregation were challenged at the University of Georgia. On January 9, the Sumter County newspaper, the

Americus Times Recorder, carried the story that U.S. District Judge William A. Bootle granted Charlayne E. Hunter and Hamilton E. Holmes entrance to the state's flagship university. Governor Vandiver knew that the 1958 laws passed supporting the Private School Amendment dictated that he close the University of Georgia, and he did. At the same time, the state attorney's office requested a stay of execution for the order, which Bootle granted. The Fifth Circuit judge, however, overruled the stay. Before the Georgia attorney general could get to Washington, D.C., to plead the case, the United States Supreme Court ordered Hunter and Holmes admitted to the University of Georgia. Riots at the university caused the administration to suspend the two black students on Wednesday, January 11. The next day, Bootle ordered them back at the university by the following Monday.⁶¹

In response to these court decisions, the Georgia General Assembly struck down the laws that closed the public schools or denied them funding if they desegregated. It did not, however, repeal the legislation that allowed the state to dispose of public school property if the federal courts ordered desegregation. To maintain at least the image of resistance to desegregation, Vandiver requested that the legislature replace the repealed laws with legislation to allow freedom of choice plans and preserve the tuition grants for children to go to private schools.⁶² Thus, while the immediate threat to the public schools had ended, the ability of the state to suspend public education in favor of private schools remained.

These events served as the background for the meeting of the second survey committee with the superintendents of Sumter County and Americus school districts. The committee and its subcommittees focused on the curriculum offered by the two districts and its costs. After the subcommittees submitted their reports on March 10, the reviewing committee planned to give its recommendations to the two boards at a meeting on March 28. On the same day, the two boards scheduled a public meeting at the local two-year college, Southwestern College, to discuss the reviewing committee's recommendations.⁶³

At the meeting on March 28, the two boards accepted the reviewing committee's report and that evening presented the findings to an audience of about 600 at the local college. With Jimmy Carter acting as the moderator, the meeting began with a statement by the coordinator of the survey that "the purpose of the reports . . . centered on the combining of the schools and the approach used was to consider every advantage of the student."⁶⁴ The major benefit of the consolidation for the reviewing committee was a comprehensive high school for around 1,000 students that would

First . . . give a good general education to every child in the county. Second . . . provide good elective courses for those who would want to use their education on finishing high school to go into a selective field. Third, satisfy all the needs for those students wishing to attend the college of their choice.⁶⁵

The survey team and the board members realized that the rural residents of the county were the largest and strongest obstacle to the consolidation of the two districts. To reassure the county residents, one committee member, Paul Carroll, dean at Georgia Southern College, assured the audience, "Whether such a program [was] put into operation in Sumter County depended on the belief of the people as to the need for such a program."⁶⁶ Addressing the potential resistance, the committee and the board members focused their remarks on curriculum opportunities, the steps involved in the merger, and the administration in the consolidated district.

The administrative structure had prevented the merger of the two districts in 1953 when the county board had begun to plan the new schools for the African American children. Before embarking on such an ambitious project, the county had proposed a consolidation plan to the city district that included a seven-member board with three members from State House of Representatives District 27, which encompassed Americus and parts of the Sumter County school district, and four members from outside of District 27, which included the remaining areas of Sumter County. Because this structure favored the county district residents and did not guarantee that any member would actually be from Americus, the city board had rejected the plan and the idea of consolidation.⁶⁷

The present reviewing board also recommended a seven-member board, but suggested that the Americus City Council appoint two members, the Sumter County Commissioners appoint two members, and the county grand jury appoint two members. The appointed members would select the seventh member. This organizational structure gave the city and the county the potential for equal representation because the county grand jury consisted of residents of both the city and the county. The board would appoint the superintendent of the consolidated district. To head off criticisms, the coordinator of the survey told the audience, "A board of education should represent no one but the children of the county."⁶⁸

After the reviewing committee completed its presentation, Carter listed the problems that confronted the city and county districts. These consisted of "crowded substandard classrooms; insufficient library, science and athletic facilities; inadequate science, music, art, foreign language and vocational courses; small classes causing two grades per teacher, and duplication of facilities."⁶⁹ He explained to the audience that the current arrangement to relieve the overcrowding in the city and the empty classrooms in the county through an exchange of students was merely a short-term solution to the problems. The long-term solution, in his opinion, was consolidation. He assured the audience that the county board would hold local meetings to discuss the procedures and that many steps were necessary before the merger happened: approval by both boards, the legislature, and the residents of the Americus and Sumter County districts.

The questions asked by the audience reflected their concerns. The first one reported by the *Americus Times Recorder* was whether the new high school would be integrated. Carter confirmed that the new high school was for white students only. Others expressed their fear that the city would dominate the new district to the detriment of the county parents and students. In their answers to the questions, the reviewing committee stressed the need for more classrooms and programs, but the audience concerned itself with the loss of influence and local community. By the end of the meeting, it was clear that the majority of those who asked questions opposed consolidation.⁷⁰ During the following months, this opposition grew in the county.

In their attempt to persuade the residents of the county, the board followed a strategy similar to one described by C. O. Fitzwater in a 1957 *American School Board Journal* article. Fitzwater explained that the foundation for successful consolidation was legislation from the state mandating the consolidation of small school districts because of the state's responsibility for funding and building construction in the created districts. Local leadership was important as well. Grassroots opinion determined the success or failure of any consolidation, even with supporting legislation. Fitzwater suggested the creation of reorganization committees to plan the new district and procedures for consolidation. Studies of the current conditions of the schools and the needs of the students were vital because they would shape all of the planning and could be used to gain public support for the proposed consolidation. Public meetings and a newspaper campaign would help keep the public informed of the efforts of the organizers and would increase local support.⁷¹

There was little leadership for district consolidation from the state level in Georgia; therefore, the school boards found themselves alone in leading the change. As outlined in Fitzwater's article, the boards had requested surveys of the county and city educational services and the needed improvements. They had presented the findings of the survey at a public meeting and followed it with smaller meetings to present the advantages and disadvantages of merging the two systems. Less than a month before the election, they began a newspaper campaign to inform the public of all the issues and to convince the county and city voters that approval of the consolidation of the two districts was in the best interest of the students.⁷²

Prior to the election on July 18, Carter actively campaigned for the consolidation of the districts, making many appearances at civic clubs and writing a series of articles for the *Americus Times Recorder*. In a speech at the Americus Kiwanis Club, he explained why both boards had approved the merger unanimously. He pointed out that the population of the county was decreasing and that the population of Americus was increasing. Because the state appropriated school funds on the basis of the number students regularly attending each school, the Americus school district received more

funding than the county district. These demographic trends and the necessity to expand curriculum were the reasons that the county board supported the merger.⁷³

In his analysis of the opposition to the merger, Carter acknowledged their sincerity and stated that he would address their main arguments. The first was a desire to preserve the status quo of small schools and the close relationship between teachers, students, and parents. While he expressed his understanding of this reservation by the parents, he ignored the relationship among the participants in schooling in his answer. Instead, he pointed out that the larger school would offer a broader curriculum and other programs for students. Second, he addressed those who claimed that the loss of the high schools would hurt businesses in Leslie and Plains (the towns with the two county high schools for white students) by pointing out that the losses would be short-term ones. In the long run, the larger, centralized high school would benefit all the businesses in the towns. How a larger school in one part of the county would benefit small businesses located elsewhere he neglected to explain. Although he had stated that he would address the opposition to the merger, the focus of the rest of his speech was that both boards believed that the time for the merger was before either district began expensive building programs alone.⁷⁴

The week before the election, the *Americus Times Recorder* began a series of articles written by Carter explaining why the school systems should merge, how the new system would be run, the cost of the system, the arguments of the proponents, and those of opponents.⁷⁵ He began by repeating the financial reasons for the merger that he had explained to the Kiwanis Club, but he gave many more details about the consequences of the decreased funding for the county residents. Through the construction of two high schools, the city and the county districts would duplicate services, but the county, with its decreasing population, would have far less support from the state than the growing city. In addition, the Sumter County residents would have to pay the majority of the cost for the new high school from local funds and a bond issue. Finally, even without the merger, the necessary construction of a single high school for the county students would still remove the high schools from Plains and Leslie, which would then suffer both the problems of losing the high schools and the burden of the added costs.⁷⁶

On July 13, he addressed what he referred to as the “reasonable” arguments against the merger. Repeating the statements of the state department of education’s reviewing committee, he acknowledged that the conversion into a single district would not be easy, but it could be done through the “combined efforts of school teachers and officials, the Board of Education, PTA groups and the people of the county.” The arguments that teachers and students have a closer relationship in a smaller school and that larger schools

have more discipline problems were again left unanswered. Instead, he pointed out that special programs could be created for “problem” students to keep them “better satisfied in school and less restless and mischievous.” After pointing out that the curriculum would be expanded to address the needs of problem students, he addressed the emotional opposition from the rural communities that would lose their high schools. He viewed their resistance to the idea of the merger as “real and justifiable” and went so far as to say, “no one should be criticized for being interested in his local school and wanting his children to be educated near home.”⁷⁷ After his acknowledgment that his neighbors’ opposition to the merger was reasonable, he returned to his theme of the advantages of the consolidated district.

In the last article of the series, Carter addressed the ability of the new consolidated district to expand the curriculum offerings and services for the county students. The curricular changes he presented corresponded to those suggested by James Conant for a comprehensive high school. Through the use of technology, tape recordings and records, the foreign languages offered would increase from only one year of Latin to two years of Latin, four years of Spanish, and four years of French. The curriculum for mathematics and science also included advanced courses. Through these additional offerings in the school, students would have individualized programs in academics that included electives in advanced work for college preparation or vocational classes for employment after graduation.⁷⁸

Carter did not quiet the opponents of consolidation with his articles. The day before the election, Sumter County Citizens Opposed to School Consolidation, led by his cousin Hugh Carter, ran an advertisement in the local paper listing eight disadvantages to the merger. The most significant objections were the appointment of the superintendent by the board, the increased possibility of desegregation, a heavier tax burden for county residents, loss of the close student–teacher relationship, and the potential of a higher dropout rate.⁷⁹ The first three may have been the unreasonable arguments that Jimmy Carter had ignored, but with the imminent desegregation of the Atlanta public schools, the opponents of consolidation appealed to the fears and prejudices of the white rural residents.

On July 18, the voters in the rural areas and Americus went to the polls to decide whether the two districts would merge. The city residents voted overwhelming to merge the districts, 786 to 172. The rural residents rejected the proposal narrowly, 502 for the merger and 586 against it. As expected, the major centers of opposition were the towns of Plains and Leslie, the locations of the two county high schools. In Leslie, only 52 voters approved the merger while 213 voted against it. In Plains, where the Carters lived, consolidation met the same fate—with only 33 approving the merger and 201 opposing it.⁸⁰

When asked for a comment, Carter’s response was surprisingly accepting of the defeat. He told the reporters,

Although many of our citizens are disappointed, we believe that the interest of everyone in better schools has been awakened, and that through democratic procedures and with the cooperation and good will of all our communities, many improvements can still be made.⁸¹

He later claimed that the rural residents of Sumter County defeated the proposed merger because of their belief that the change was the first step toward the desegregation of the local schools.⁸²

Other explanations were that the smaller communities feared the domination of the larger city of Americus and that the high schools were the center of these small communities. If all the decisions were made for Americus, then the children from the county communities would be lost in the district.⁸³ Superintendent Foy explained that he believed that the rural communities opposed it because those “who had the voting power could not accept the loss of their schools, which at that time were larger than they had ever been. Yet, [they were] too small to meet the demands of the recommendations for the standards of the state.”⁸⁴

All of the interpretations of the defeat are plausible, but what was not discussed in the newspaper articles or at the reported meetings was that many of the facilities for African American students were already consolidated and the county high school for black students was near Americus. Those opposed to desegregation saw the consolidation of the schools for white students as the first step toward the desegregation of the schools. Finally, the night after the election, the Carters found a crude, hand-painted sign on the door of their warehouse that said, “Coons and Carters Go Together.”⁸⁵ Thus, the political and social climate in Georgia in 1961 and his own experiences supported Carter’s explanation that the fear of desegregation was the primary reason the rural residents rejected consolidation.

While the loss of the consolidation election was a “stinging disappointment” for Carter, he found the campaign exciting.⁸⁶ The voters defeated the idea to make the school system more efficient, but he remained chair of the board after the election. For the next year, he turned his attention to the African American students of the county where he faced increasing frustrations in his leadership toward a more efficient school district because of the tradition of “rank discrimination against Negroes.”⁸⁷

In rural areas throughout the South, parents and their employers pulled black children out of school in the spring and the fall to work in the fields. Landowners in Sumter County followed this tradition, and before the high school had been built in 1958, the majority of black teenagers had dropped out of the school after the eighth grade. After the construction of the high school for African American students, the board realized that this tradition compromised the funding for schooling in the county. Because the state allotted funding and teachers to the districts based on the Average Daily Attendance of

students, the county's funding suffered when the African American students dropped out or skipped school to work. While the board members understood that most African American families in the county depended on agricultural work to support their families, the members also knew that the students' absences cost the entire county state funds.

In February, Carter suggested that the board "write a letter to [each] landowner, explaining to him how much it cost us each day a student is not in school, and ask for his cooperation in getting the students who live on his place to attend school."⁸⁸ He understood the power that the landowners had over the sharecroppers and their families from his own businesses and from observing the relationship between his father and the tenant farmers when he was a boy. Because of the consolidation campaign the prior year, the board could appeal to the landowners' knowledge of the financial needs of the county school system. At the March meeting, Foy reported to the board that since the letters had been sent to the landowners, attendance for African American children had improved.⁸⁹

This improvement was only temporary. The following fall semester, Foy reported that enrollment in the county schools had dropped, but that "the enrollment will climb considerably . . . after crops have been harvested since colored pupils have not yet enrolled."⁹⁰ More than letters were necessary to challenge the neglect of the educational needs of the African American children in the county.

In addition to the seasonal absences of the African American children, both the county's high school and the junior high school in Americus that served all the African American students lacked accreditation. This lapse in equality in the educational facilities left the Sumter County school district open to legal action. The major obstacles to accreditation were the condition of the high school's library and the lack of classroom space, library books, and a gym at the junior high. For the high school to gain accreditation, the city board had to correct these deficiencies at the junior high. Although the districts remained separate, the city board wanted the county to contribute financially for the improvements, in particular for the new gym. The county board sympathized with the city board's financial problems, but for such a large project, it had to issue bonds, which could only be used on county school district property. The location of the school on city property prohibited the use of county funds for the construction of the gym.

The county, however, could participate with the city in construction of a recreational center that included a football field, baseball field, and a field house at the high school that black students attended. These facilities would be used by the high school during the school year and by the Recreation Commission on the weekends and in the summer.⁹¹ The joint effort gave the black students the facilities needed at the high school, and the city the opportunity to have a recreation area for black citizens. The construction of these