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50 YEARS OF INTEGRATION

Schools change, but slowly

Central Florida stalled for years after Brown v. Board of Education.

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Syryal Kinsler remembers the stony stares, angry insults and stray beer bottles hurled his way as he walked to Memorial Junior High School in Orlando.

"It was a little scary," Kinsler said of the daily treks he and other black students took through a white neighborhood in 1964. "They'd just come out and stare at us."

The hatred surprised Kinsler, 13 at the time. He knew only that a U.S. Supreme Court decision made it possible for him to go to an all-white school and that his mother had insisted he do it.

That decision, in a case known as Brown v. Board of Education, changed the direction of public schools. On May 17, 1954, the court declared that school districts no longer legally could run separate school systems for black and white children.

"School mixing" did not come easy, however. It took more than a decade, hundreds of legal skirmishes and the passage of a federal civil-rights law before integration would become widespread. Orange County did not even start desegregating until 1962.

A half-century later, many view Brown's legacy as groundbreaking yet imperfect. No one doubts educational opportunities for black youngsters have improved dramatically, but many think the decision's full promise has been unmet.

In 2004, black students lag on standardized tests and suffer from high dropout rates. Even in schools with racial balance, segregation often exists within the buildings, as black students fill up remedial classes and whites the advanced ones.

Some schools still aren't integrated, leaving plenty of black students attending schools that look like schools during legal segregation -- mostly black and mostly poor.

Black communities also paid a price, as shutdowns and conversions of traditional black schools removed local centers of black life and left teachers out of work.

"The legacy of Brown, in some respects, is still playing out," said William Tate, an education professor at Washington University in St. Louis and a writer on race and education. "I think that gray area is really where we are."

Today some schools are true melting pots, places such as Altamonte Elementary in Seminole County or Lake George Elementary in Orange, which have near even mixes of white, black and Hispanic youngsters and no signs of racial strife.

Many still view that as the ideal and fear any retreat.

Kat Gordon, an Orange County School Board member and Kissimmee teacher, was teaching in Orange County when the district integrated and briefly lost her job after she was transferred from her black school to a white school.

She's not satisfied with the progress but is heartened by today's students, who strike her as less race-conscious than previous generations.

"It doesn't matter to them," she said, "and that's the way it should be."

Rachel Philpot, a white seventh-grader at private St. John Vianney School in Orange County, knew nothing about the Brown case until this spring, when her class was required to enter an essay-and-poster contest on the ruling.

Rachel won first prize for her poster, a drawing in black and white. "Color doesn't change who I am," it read.

The Brown case started in Topeka, Kan., where Oliver Brown, a black father, sued for his daughter Linda to attend the white school near their home, not the black one a mile away.

The Supreme Court decision struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine that had been the legal justification for segregation since the 1890s. The unanimous ruling declared school segregation a violation of the 14th amendment of the U.S. Constitution,

which guarantees "equal protection of the laws" to all citizens:

"We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Many white residents in the South were furious.

In a brief to the Supreme Court -- required in late 1954 from states with segregation laws -- Florida's Attorney General Richard Ervin explained the state's stance. "Widespread white hostility to immediate, enforced integration of the public schools is a fact of life in Florida," he wrote.

Ervin appealed for "reasonable time" and noted integration would mean a change in the state's Constitution, which since 1885 had read, "white and colored children shall not be taught in the same school."

Five years later, only the Dade County school system had integrated -- by having four black students attend one white elementary school. By 1963, nine counties, including Orange and Volusia, had at least a few integrated classrooms. But the Florida branch of the NAACP described such progress as "token."

Many districts were still in court hashing out desegregation plans in the 1970s. Some, including Orange and Seminole in Central Florida, remain under those plans today.

In other Southern states, integration efforts turned into battles. In Little Rock, Ark., the National Guard patrolled the hallways of Central High School in 1957, protecting nine black students enrolled in the white school. In Virginia a "massive resistance" plan meant a few districts closed schools rather than integrate.

Locally, integration efforts produced tension but few major incidents.

In July 1963, a cross was burned at Winter Park High School after the school decided to admit its first black student.

In 1971, newly integrated Seminole High School in Sanford was closed for three days after black students refused to attend class, protesting the suspension of a black student and the exclusion of blacks from some student groups.

Efforts at racial balance expanded across Central Florida from 1966 to 1971, often under pressure from federal courts. Sometimes districts bused students and swapped staffs to make their schools racially mixed.

Busing, as a solution, was fiercely opposed in many places, including Orange County. About 900 white parents attended a

January 1970 meeting of the School Board to protest the disruption of the neighborhood school system.

Over time, the Brown case and the legal aftermath produced results even beyond the battleground Southern states, said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the University at Albany in New York.

"I think across the country people reacted to the very visible battles in the South over segregation and eventually noted they had similar problems in their own communities," he said.

Logan and his staff have been cataloging more than 1,000 desegregation cases across the nation. From 1968 to 1990, they found average rates of segregation in schools dropped sharply.

But the country has made little progress in changing residential patterns that divide communities along racial lines -- a problem exasperated by white flight to the suburbs in many communities.

That, in turn, has made it difficult to racially balance schools, especially once court orders of enforcement ended. Many have been lifted since 1990 after a Supreme Court ruling made the process easier.

In Florida, at least five school districts, including Broward and Hillsborough, have seen their court orders lifted in the past decade. Seminole hopes to join them this year, and Orange has begun exploring whether it, too, should seek "unitary status" -- the legal term for a district that bears no sign it once divided students by race.

Other local counties are already free of their old orders.

The trend brought a warning last year from the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University that schools are resegregating. The Mumford center contends, however, that resegregation is not intentional, but rather the result of stubborn residential patterns and rapid growth among nonblack populations, particularly Hispanics.

In some communities there has been a return to more racially identifiable schools. Memorial, the white school Syryal Kinsler integrated, is now 82 percent black, and eight other Orange schools are more than 90 percent black.

At the same time, a huge gap remains between black and white students' academic performance. Nationally, black 17-year-olds, for example, read only as well as white 13-year-olds, according to the National Assessment of Yearly Progress.

To Albany's Logan, such statistics make the bigger issue not the mix of skin colors but whether minority students receive a quality education.

"We never did it before with segregated schools, and we're not doing it today. So the real question on the table is, what are we going to do about it?" Logan said.

It's sad that an equal education remains a legal issue after so many years, said retired educator Ernestine Mosley, who now runs a tutoring center.

"If the powers that be would make all schools good schools, then there would be no need to go to court," said Mosley, one of the first black teachers to work in a white school in Orange.

Still, Mosley said, public schools are better than 50 years ago, when inadequate black schools were the norm, and even 30 years ago, when as a black administrator at a newly integrated school she was "called every name in the book" by white parents.

Bill Hall also has seen a transformation and worries about any return to the past.

As a teen, he played football for all-white New Smyrna Beach High School. Sometimes his team would have "sandlot games" with players from all-black Chisholm High School or go watch their games. Official games were forbidden.

Hall could see the black school wasn't built, maintained or stocked as well as his school. Even the Chisholm football uniforms weren't as nice.

He was teaching when the district integrated in 1969.

"We were a lot more alike than we were different," said Hall, who retired two months ago as superintendent of Volusia County schools. "Black parents had a lot of the same desires and wants for their children that white parents had."

Mavis Starke couldn't agree more. In 1962, she lent her name and the names of her sons, Syryal and Winston Kinsler, to the Orange desegregation lawsuit.

She had gone to a "not-too-much-of-nothing" black school in North Florida and knew the message such places sent youngsters. Already active in efforts to integrate restaurants, theaters and stores, Starke saw the school fight as a natural.

"I wanted my children," she said, "to have the best of everything."

Integration ultimately gave Syryal Kinsler what his mother yearned for, an education equal to that offered to white children. A graduate of Orlando's Edgewater High School and Florida State University, Kinsler, 53, works today as a maintenance supervisor

for the Orange school districts.

While the Brown case broadened his vistas, it also opened his eyes.

When he arrived at Memorial after years in all-black schools, "I was just overwhelmed," he said. "They could give every kid a book for every class? And a new book at that? How could you have so much and then so little over here?"

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