

The Pursuit of True Freedom: School Desegregation in Racine, Wisconsin

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Abstract

Throughout its existence, the United States had been inundated by racial conflict. Following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, school segregation became one of the most controversial racial issues in our country. In the North, where de facto segregation ruled supreme, integrating public schools proved to be an especially arduous task. Racine, Wisconsin, was a typical Northern city in many regards. However, due to outstanding community support and extraordinary leadership, particularly from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its president Julian Thomas, the Racine Unified School District triumphed over segregation. Because of its successful implementation of school desegregation, Racine became a model for racial accord for the rest of the country.

“Glory, glory, hallelujah!” was the cheer that echoed throughout the streets of Racine, Wisconsin, on a cold spring day in 1854, when more than 100 Racine men, in response to a “Revere-like summons” issued by crusading newspaper editor Sherman Booth, defied the injustice of racial prejudice and secured freedom for a fellow man. The man, Joshua Glover, was

a runaway slave who had escaped from his master's custody in St. Louis two years earlier. Glover was living in Racine and working at a local sawmill in 1854 when he was tracked down by agents of his owner, captured, and arrested under the Fugitive Slave Act. Taken aback by his unjust incarceration, a mob more than 100 Racine anti-slavery activists led by Booth took the next steamer to Milwaukee, where Glover was being held. The crowd of angry Racine residents broke down the jailhouse door and freed Glover, allowing him to escape to Canada and reclaim what they believed to be his "indefensible right" to freedom.¹ This event spread anti-slavery sentiment across the state, leading the Wisconsin Supreme Court to shock the nation by making Wisconsin the first state to declare the Fugitive Slave Laws unconstitutional. During the tumultuous decade that preceded the Civil War, Glover's emancipation inspired abolitionists across the nation to view Racine as a model for racial accord.²

During the middle of the next century, another period of turmoil enveloped the United States. In a country torn apart by racial issues, few generated more controversy than school segregation. Yet, just as the Racine community had bonded together to liberate Joshua Glover from his unjust imprisonment, it again proved exemplary in its successful liberation of African Americans from the injustice of segregated schools. In 1975, after a decade-long struggle to desegregate its schools, America would once more look to Racine as a "model for the nation."³

One hundred years after Joshua Glover earned nationwide celebrity, the United States Supreme Court ruled, in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." This landmark ruling was intended to end the practice of segregated education in the United States. Yet in the years that followed, segregation was still in full bloom in many cities outside of the South.⁴

Prior to the 1954 *Brown* ruling, Southern-style school segregation was fairly simple—African Americans went to “colored” schools, whites went to white schools. Although far from easy, this made the desegregation of schools in the South a more straightforward undertaking. However, in most Northern communities, geography, not skin color, was the primary cause of racial segregation. Because racial segregation was fundamentally intertwined with residential segregation, desegregating schools in the North would prove to be a much more complex and arduous task. Despite supporting school desegregation in principle—a 1963 poll discovered that 75 percent approved of the *Brown* decision⁵—Northern whites opposed it in practice, arguing against the disruption of what they believed to be “the natural order of things.” According to historian Thomas Sugrue, “the debate over race and education in the North came to hinge on” one major notion, “the neighborhood school.”⁶

In 1962, *Time* magazine called the neighborhood school “a concept as American as apple pie,”⁷ but to most African Americans it was not nearly as appetizing. Even in the absence of officially separate schools, Northern whites used their freedom in the housing market to produce public schools that were nearly as segregated as those in the South. And these same Northern whites who professed their approval of desegregation fiercely defended the separateness of neighborhood schools. But schools attended predominantly by African American children were not equal to schools attended predominantly by white children. “Separate” really did not mean “equal.” Francis Keppel, U.S. Commissioner of Education, addressed this point in a 1964 speech: “Whether it exists by law or custom, by edict or by tradition, by patterns of employment or patterns of housing, segregation hurts our children, Negro and white alike. And nowhere is this damage more devastating than in education.”⁸

In Racine, like in other parts of the country, damage was being done. At the time of the *Brown* decision, racial segregation was relatively new to Racine County. It had always been a diverse area; Danish, Polish, German, and Czech immigrants made Racine a “melting pot” of sorts. Yet as late as 1940, this “melting pot” was distinctively white. The 1940 U.S. Census reported that only 432 out of the total 67,195 residents of Racine were “black”—less than 1 percent of the population. As in many Northern cities however, the onset of World War II created a demand for African American workers in Racine. By 1960, Racine County’s African American population had grown tenfold, becoming a significant segment in the community. And like in other Northern cities, the impact of this rapid minority population growth was amplified as a result of housing patterns and the compression of minority populations into concentrated neighborhoods. While newer schools in the suburbs were populated almost exclusively by white children, the minority student population was disproportionately concentrated in older, run-down, inner-city schools. According to the Racine Unified School District, by 1963, 73 percent of black pupils lived in an inner-city area that represented about four square miles out the 100 square mile district.⁹

Even though de facto segregation persisted in the North, it was coming under scrutiny as a destructive mechanism for African Americans, especially in schools. In the early 1960s, as the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation approached, many African Americans saw de facto segregation as the primary culprit for the substantial gap in affluence, status, and power between themselves and whites.¹⁰ Nowhere was this gap more prevalent than in the public schools of cities in the North. Many, like Reverend Charles H. Smith, member of the Board of Directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), were quick to point out the connection between unequal educational opportunities and inferior

economic progress. As Smith saw it, de facto segregation not only denied African American children from receiving equal educational opportunities, but prevented them from attaining “the real freedom to which [blacks] have a right.”¹¹

Throughout the 1960s, as this “real freedom” still eluded many in Racine, the NAACP was widely considered what the *Racine Journal-Times* in 1970 would call “the major, if not the only, spokesman for the cause of equality for minority citizens” in the area. Although the local NAACP’s success hinged on much more than just one person, no individual was more important to achieving racial equality in Racine than Julian Thomas.¹²

A 1952 graduate (and Hall of Fame inductee) of Racine’s Washington Park High School, Thomas was hired as a factory worker at J.I. Case Company. At J.I. Case, Thomas worked hard and quickly rose to become an executive—no small feat for a black man at the time. He was elected president of the Racine NAACP in 1964 and would remain in that position for the next 22 years. Thomas served as president of the Wisconsin NAACP and as chairman of the seven-state region of the NAACP. He was also involved in numerous organizations, boards, and committees in the Racine community.¹³

Thomas’s considerable public influence was inspired by his ability to inspire trust and respect among all races. His steadfast and logical leadership would prove to be the cornerstone upon which racial integration in Racine was built. But in the mid-1960s, his goal of achieving racial integration was not shared by most citizens of Racine, white or black. Thomas realized that before Racine could overcome desegregation, he had to substantially augment awareness and interest in racial issues. In describing Thomas’s struggle, Keith Mack, an administrator at Lakeside School in Racine, drew on a quote from Dante: “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in time of moral crisis maintain their neutrality.”¹⁴ Mack sensed that Thomas saw

a moral crisis at the heart of de facto segregation of Racine schools. Thomas resolved to move people from every segment of Racine's diverse community away from the position of neutrality to take a stand with him.

Thomas was not the only activist who attempted to awaken Racine's African American community to the challenges of desegregation. At the 1965 Racine NAACP annual banquet, Edwin C. Berry, executive director of the Chicago Urban League, challenged Racine African Americans to accept the "responsibility to become involved...to see that your children get an education." Without education, he said, a black child "can't make it in the modern world." Like Thomas, Berry knew that active involvement was the only way to escape what he called "the cultural castration" that had befallen the American Negro. "We aren't going to lick this thing by hiding," he said.¹⁵

In the Jim Crow South, many whites employed blatant racism in order to keep African Americans in hiding. Although racism was tame in Racine compared to other parts of the country, some overt racism still persisted, particularly in the public school system. This came as a shock to many, including NAACP Education Director June Shagaloff. Since 1950, Shagaloff played a critical role in fighting school segregation throughout the United States. While she had witnessed a great deal of racism throughout her career as a civil rights activist, prior to her visit to Racine, Shagaloff said she "had always believed that racial prejudice was less in a northern state like Wisconsin." But Shagaloff was appalled when she saw the Confederate flag flying high over Racine's William Horlick High School in April 1965. After seeing the flag, which she said symbolized "a history of slavery, bigotry, and prejudice" used at a public high school, she was no longer surprised at Racine's "unwillingness to recognize de facto segregation in its school system."¹⁶

Thomas felt that school segregation in Racine was not as much the result of racism but of apathy. Like many Northern whites, most white citizens of Racine were simply indifferent to the plight of the American Negro. According to Scott Johnson, a Racine student in the 1960s, segregation was simply “not acknowledged” by whites. Moreover, some Racine residents even put an optimistic spin on segregation, citing the “advantage” of neighborhood schools.¹⁷ Johnson’s recollection of white sentiment in Racine was echoed by experts like June Shagaloff. The “fact that too many people in Racine feel there is no problem,” she declared, was the major reason for the racial problems in the Racine Unified School District.¹⁸ Even the school district itself declared racial segregation to be merely a “function of living patterns...not the result of any policies of the Board of Education.” But to Thomas and his allies, it *was* the Board’s policies—or rather its lack of policies—that produced racial segregation in Racine’s schools.¹⁹

In October 1964, the Racine Unified School Board published “A Proposed Statement of Position,” its first open admission that the district did indeed have a problem. The board committed to “studying the problems of educating disadvantaged youth” in order to “develop programs to overcome the handicaps environment may have placed” on these children.²⁰ While some considered this an important step toward equal educational opportunities for minorities in Racine, many were not satisfied with what they viewed as “token progress.” Thomas was fearful that the school board underestimated the potential volatility of the situation. Unless immediate action was taken, Thomas declared, “There’s going to be another Birmingham right here in Racine.”²¹ He was referring to the widely publicized racial confrontations in Birmingham, Alabama, in the summer of 1963 that produced such rampant mayhem that the federal government was forced to intervene. Neither the school board, Thomas, nor anyone else in Racine wanted a situation like the one in Birmingham.

To avoid this type of racial conflict in Racine, the district needed to make meaningful progress toward solving the problem of desegregation. In 1966, it received a valuable, albeit inadvertent, introduction to racial integration. The closing of Franklin Junior High School and the subsequent opening of Gifford Junior High School required the district to redraw its junior high boundaries. At the start of the 1966–67 school year, Franklin Junior High’s former students, almost half of whom were black, found themselves dispersed among four junior high schools²² (see table 1).

The following year, the Racine Unified School District was again in flux. The closing of another inner-city junior high school and the opening of J.I. Case High School sent the district back to the drawing board. Again, new boundaries resulted in a more equal distribution of African American students. Although racial integration was not necessarily the purpose of the realignment of district boundaries, the dispersion of minorities that followed the opening of new schools in Racine presented the school district with an example to follow in the years to come.²³

As the heat of school integration movement intensified in the North, Racine, a city previously icily indifferent to de facto segregation, began to thaw. In 1966, the Racine Unified School Board produced its “Report of the Special Committee on the Educational Opportunities of the Minority Group Children,” articulating 13 principles that would guide the “search for improvement of educational opportunities for minority group children.” Two years later, the board stepped up this search, making their stance against unequal educational opportunities official by adopting a policy to “take specific action to erase undesirable cultural, ethnic, and racial imbalances.”²⁴ The passing of this resolution made all plans within the district contingent on the reduction of racial imbalance. Thomas of course supported this resolution, but dryly suggested it was a “little late in coming.” According to him, “it should have been done five years

ago.”²⁵ Despite the extended wait, many in Racine were excited about the significant progress toward racial equality made by the school board.

Perhaps the biggest step taken on the path to desegregation in Racine came on the heels of the 1969 Howell School controversy. As whites all over the North staunchly defended their neighborhood schools, this Racine neighborhood school offered many African Americans a prime example of de facto segregation at its worst. Located at one of the city’s busiest intersections, Howell School had a minority student population of more than 75 percent. Throughout the 1960s, the school’s terrible condition had repeatedly garnered complaints from administrators, teachers, and parents. The building’s condition was so poor that there was a widespread concern that strong winds would cause the roof to collapse. In fact, Howell was the only school in the district that was required to have “high wind” drills in addition to fire drills. Several times, the Racine Unified School District had promised families in the Howell area, via bond referenda, a solution to the dismal situation. Each time, however, these families were disappointed by the district’s failure to act.²⁶

In the absence of any action by the district, the Racine NAACP decided that it had to take charge. In November 1969, following a formal inspection, the NAACP Education Committee declared Howell “blatantly unsafe” and an “absolute disgrace” to the city of Racine and to the Racine Unified School District.²⁷ Claiming that the inaction of the board had relegated Howell’s students “to a sub-human level,” the committee rendered the school district “guilty, not only of child neglect, but of hypocrisy as well.” The findings of the Education Committee left the NAACP with no other choice but to demand the immediate closing of Howell School.”²⁸

After a prolonged deadlock on the issue, the Racine Unified School Board finally succumbed to the pressure and intimidation of the NAACP and passed a resolution to

permanently close Howell School as of January 10, 1970. As with the school closings in 1966 and 1967, the closing of Howell contributed to the further dispersal of African American students among predominantly white schools.²⁹ Moreover, the closing of Howell confirmed the powerful impact of the NAACP and its young president, Julian Thomas. Although Thomas was already a revered leader prior to the Howell dispute, his successful leadership in this difficult and potentially volatile situation inspired unanimous confidence from the African American community. Equally significant, Thomas won the respect of members of the white community. Most people in Racine, black and white, had proved to be tentative in coping with racial difficulties. In Thomas, Racine recognized a leader who would provide the assertiveness needed to overcome these racial difficulties and direct others to do the same.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the realignment of district boundaries, dispersion of minority students, and racial enlightenment of the school board served to whet the appetite of those hungry for integration. According to Thomas, the NAACP “began to think in terms of... what centers could be utilized within the inner city where white kids would be brought in and minority children out.”³⁰ If busing was necessary, as most thought it was, then “it should include busing of students both ways,” Thomas proclaimed. This concept sent shock waves through Racine’s white, middle-class suburbia. Most of these parents had no problem with reducing “racial imbalances” and even with the busing of inner-city students to what the district referred to as “outer schools.” The idea of having their children bused to inner-city schools, however, seemed inconceivable.³¹

In 1972, the Racine Unified School Board began discussions regarding plans to desegregate schools in the district. Their hastily drawn plans included the busing of suburban children to inner-city schools. As in many Northern cities, two-way busing inspired bitter protest

from many white parents in Racine. Even though almost half of all public school students rode the bus to school by 1970, opponents of busing championed neighborhood schools, defending the time-honored tradition of children walking or riding their bicycles to school. Across the North, the frenzy of the white electorate led many elected officials to jump aboard the anti-busing bandwagon. In 1972, Racine was no different.³² The white outcry against busing compelled the school board to dismiss the desegregation proposals altogether. According to Racine Superintendent C. Richard Nelson, the failure of the first attempt at desegregation forced the district to seriously reevaluate its approach. Although he said the plan was misunderstood, Nelson admitted that the district made some critical mistakes in its initial attempt to establish a strategy for desegregation, and realized that it needed to take a better “method of approach” in carrying out the order to desegregate.³³

Thomas and the NAACP, however, were not in the mood to be patient while the district worried about stepping on the toes of white parents. Almost 20 years since the *Brown* decision, many in Racine felt that the only way to achieve school desegregation in Racine was through legal action. In 1972, Thomas and the Racine NAACP, fed up with token progress and empty promises, laid plans to take court action against the Racine Unified School District. “The only thing that would prevent us from filing suit,” Thomas said, “is for the schools [in Racine] to be desegregated.”³⁴ Despite his strong desire for immediate action, Thomas recognized that the big picture of desegregation extended beyond Racine. In the eyes of the NAACP, Racine was an important, yet small battlefield in the larger war against school segregation. In 1973, Thomas informed the district of the NAACP’s intention not to pursue a lawsuit in Racine until the Supreme Court had ruled on the pending Detroit and Denver desegregation suits,³⁵ citing “the great similarity between these school districts and ours.”³⁶ Thomas and the NAACP continued to

cooperate with Nelson and the district to pursue, in the words of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), “the legal right to a nonsegregated education...for all students.”³⁷

Fittingly, later that year it was the Wisconsin DPI that drove the Unified School District to put the decisive nail in the coffin of school segregation in Racine. In June 1973, the DPI sent out state guidelines for desegregation to all school districts. These guidelines insisted on racial balance “within ten percentage points of the proportion of all ethnic groups in their district.”

William Colby, director of the DPI’s Equal Educational Opportunities division, was hopeful that this would compel racially imbalanced districts to integrate. However, as he later explained, the state guidelines “were only recommendations and did not have very much force.”³⁸ Yet combined with the external pressure from the NAACP and the Racine community, these guidelines finally pressed the district into a momentous decision that led the city to be viewed as a “model for the nation.”³⁹

In a September 1973 meeting, school board president Gilbert Berthelsen motioned for a resolution that adopted the guidelines set by the DPI. The motion, scheduled for a vote in October, sparked intense debate in Racine. In many ways, the controversy surrounding the “Berthelsen motion,” as it became known, echoed the wide-ranging debates across the North in regards to public school desegregation. Some, like Thomas, were elated at the prospect of ultimately realizing school desegregation and emphatically called for the passage of the motion. Thomas urged the school board to adopt the motion and “correct this damnable situation in our District.”⁴⁰ However, Thomas’s efforts to persuade some, especially board member Lowell McNeill, were futile. In fact, McNeill was one of the motion’s most fervent public opponents, even rejecting the idea that the district had segregated schools.⁴¹ Furthermore, he argued, the widespread busing that would accompany a desegregation plan would mean a “complete end” to

the advantage of neighborhood schools.⁴² This point of view resonated in almost every Northern city and gained significant support among whites in Racine.

Other groups demonstrated their resistance to school desegregation in a more extreme manner. One group in particular, the National Socialist White People's Party, caused quite a stir in Racine. Wearing swastika armbands, members loudly denounced racial mixing and distributed literature supporting white self-determination. Although the presence of the National Socialists received considerable media attention, few whites in Racine shared their radicalism.⁴³

It was not just white citizens who opposed the Berthelsen motion. Many African Americans, including school board member Reverend Lawrence Hunt, felt that the implementation of a desegregation plan would do more harm than good for minority students. Contending the proposal for a quota system would mean "resegregation" for black students, Hunt insisted upon the value of schools with a heavy concentration of minorities as a way to avoid "segregation ... from their own culture." He alleged that many of the district's educational inequalities stemmed not from the physical distribution of minority students, but from the shortage of minority teachers and lack of emphasis on minority curriculum.⁴⁴

The most overwhelming objection from the African American community to the proposed desegregation plan surrounded busing. Maintaining that the burden of desegregation would fall squarely on the shoulders of minority students, many questioned whether the benefits of school desegregation outweighed the extensive busing that accompanied it. This stance was publicly supported by a few large community organizations, including the Racine Urban Ministry and the Racine Clergy Association.⁴⁵ To supporters of the Berthelsen motion, winning over this segment of dissenters was imperative to making desegregation work in Racine. As the

school board vote approached, Berthelsen implored these dissenters to look past the flaws of the initial proposal, stressing that “segregation or desegregation...is the only issue before us.”⁴⁶

On October 8, 1973, the Racine Unified School Board accepted Berthelsen’s motion by narrowly passing the resolution requiring that “no school within the Unified School District shall have a minority population in excess of an amount 10 percent above the percentage of minority students in the District.” The school board resolved to implement this resolution by the start of the 1975 school year.⁴⁷ Following the passage of this resolution, some feared the widespread dissent, protest, and violence that developed in other Northern cities attempting to integrate. However, as Colby recognized, there were “far more wholesome attitudes in Racine.”⁴⁸ Not only did citizens want to avoid any sort of demonstrative violence, the majority was determined to circumvent the political football that had plagued other cities. Instead of forcing an ugly desegregation lawsuit, the community developed a sense of pride in the voluntary nature of desegregation in Racine. This respectful and virtuous reaction of Racine citizens to the school board’s decision played a crucial role in the city’s exemplary implementation of school integration.

By 1974, even though most of Racine had accepted the concept of school integration, the city was still sharply divided on the structure, size, and scope of a potential desegregation plan. The October 1973 resolution created a citizen’s advisory committee to develop four plans for the desegregation process. “Minimum busing” was among the criteria the committee established for the development of the four plans to be presented to the school board in July 1974.⁴⁹ Yet busing, as it had been before the resolution, would continue to be a focus of debate in Racine. Amazingly, in spite of the committee’s intentions, all four plans drew flak from the public in regards to busing.⁵⁰

As the school board vote drew near, Thomas and the NAACP took what he called “a stand not to take a stand,” deciding to not publicly endorse any one of the four plans. Although he had conveyed some of his likes and dislikes of the four plans to the school board, Thomas said he did not want to give the board “an excuse not to do anything.”⁵¹ His decision to refrain from speaking out against the Redistribution Plan prior to the school board vote attracted some criticism from the black community. Pegged by the *Racine Star-Times* as the “one-way busing” plan, the Redistribution Plan had incurred a great deal of public opposition from the African American community because it “placed the burden of busing on minority students.” However, Thomas and the NAACP recognized it was the only plan with a chance of gaining school board approval. As difficult as it was to remain silent, Thomas realized strong protest against the Redistribution Plan would only result in the postponement of school integration.⁵²

On August 12, 1974, the Racine Unified School Board voted to adopt the Redistribution Plan, which called for the busing of minority children away from the inner city, even ending regular classes at some inner-city schools. According to Reverend Eugene Boutilier, “most knowledgeable members of the [black] community were not in favor of this plan.” However, as Thomas understood, the possibility of further delaying school desegregation in Racine was far worse than the problems associated with the plan. Thomas and the NAACP were not the only ones to sacrifice short-term objectives in order to achieve the greater, long-term goal of school integration in Racine. Board member Reverend Howard Stanton favored the Cluster Plan, which offered parents a choice, within their geographic “cluster,” of the type of school their child would attend. Yet, despite his misgivings, Stanton voted for the Redistribution Plan, admitting that “the cluster plan [had] no chance of passing.”⁵³ Even Superintendent Nelson had contended

that the Redistribution Plan, as “the most acceptable plan to the white community,” was the only plan with the possibility of being approved by the school board.⁵⁴

While it was no surprise to Thomas that the board selected the plan least upsetting to white parents, he was not prepared to surrender. Instead, Thomas began his quest to remedy the “one-way busing plan.” As presented to the school board, the Redistribution Plan involved the least amount of student busing of the four plans. But as many opponents of the plan had maintained, it put “the burden of desegregation” on black students. The plan called for the reassignment of more than 50 percent of Racine’s minority students, compared to only 3 percent of white students. Although he would not seek a reversal of the board’s decision, Thomas demanded a meeting with school officials to share the NAACP’s concerns about this “unfair” and “unacceptable” plan.⁵⁵

Those who knew Thomas had often heard him recite his favorite quote: “No man is too big to be small and the real test comes when a small man thinks big.” In Thomas’s case, thinking big about school desegregation in Racine led to a “real test” of his mettle as a leader. Faced with a plan that caused many in the black community to question the merit of school desegregation, it was up to him to salvage the vision of “true freedom” he had for Racine.⁵⁶

Pursuing a spirit of cooperation, a determined Thomas worked with Superintendent Nelson and other school officials to find a middle ground that appeased some of the concerns of African Americans in Racine. On January 4, 1975, a revised Redistribution Plan was presented to the board. In this presentation, the committee admitted that the original plan had “placed the burden of busing on the minorities.” The revised plan had, to an extent, eased this burden by reducing the difference in the numbers of children moving in versus moving out of the inner city. The revised plan also alleviated concern about the closing of three inner-city schools. Instead,

these schools would become magnet schools, used for optional programs like fine arts. These magnet schools would also further reduce the difference in students being bused in versus bused out.⁵⁷ Finally, the revised plan also addressed class size, another grievance of many African Americans, by reducing the student-to-staff ratio to 24.9-to-1.⁵⁸

The revised Redistribution Plan, despite significant improvements, still left many black parents unsatisfied. Stressing the long-term potential of integration, Thomas worked tirelessly to convince African American parents to go along with the plan. “[It] does not meet all of our criteria, but it’s not far off,” he proclaimed. “It’s a workable plan.”⁵⁹ Parents eventually accepted the plan, as they came to understand that the benefits of desegregation far outweighed its shortcomings. It was Thomas’s effort to promote compromise and unify support in the black community, despite his own trepidations about the desegregation plan, which laid the foundation for the success of school integration in Racine.

September 2, 1975, the first day of school in the newly desegregated Racine Unified School District, brought a quiet unease to Racine, perhaps a calm before the storm. As students prepared for new schools and teachers prepared for new students, no one knew what to expect. Superintendent Nelson, however, was optimistic about the coming school year. As the head of the district, he had the primary responsibility of carrying out the order to desegregate. Armed with an unwavering belief in the value of school integration, Nelson publicly and privately won over doubters throughout the district. Desegregation was important, he proclaimed, not only because the laws indicated segregated schools were illegal, but because of its social and academic payoff. Nelson also firmly believed that integration would procure economic benefits, reversing white flight from Racine. Like Thomas, he understood that desegregation could encompass more than just a school district. And like Thomas, he knew the value of community

action in achieving such lofty goals. Despite first-day jitters from some in the community, Nelson's optimistic predictions prevailed. After all of the clamor leading up to September 2, he could not have been more elated in publicly announcing that "the first day under the desegregation plan was quieter than a usual opening day."⁶⁰

Racine became celebrated across the country for its successful school desegregation, earning the type of praise that would have made Racine's earliest liberator, Sherman Booth, and his men proud. *The New York Times* called the school integration program in Racine "a model for the nation."⁶¹ Applauding the "mature manner in which this most difficult of community problems was approached," *The Milwaukee Sentinel* suggested Racine serve as "a standard for other metropolitan areas to follow."⁶² Residents of Racine echoed these sentiments. "Things have gone very smoothly," said one teacher of the desegregation effort. In a 1976 survey, 90 percent of teachers and more than 80 percent of parents "believed desegregation was working successfully."⁶³ Perhaps the best indicator of the success of desegregation was the approval of children like Terry Price, an African American fifth-grader bused from the inner city. Of his new school, Terry cheerfully professed, "I just like it here better."⁶⁴

Yet the triumph of desegregation did more for Racine than just give children like Terry a better school. Although many originally saw desegregation as solely a way of equalizing educational benefits between blacks and whites, the effects of desegregation resonated to a much larger degree, advancing interracial and intercultural relations in every facet of the community. Like Thomas, others in Racine used desegregation to think big, incorporating it into the broader role of promoting a racially harmonious society.

Activists and scholars across the nation were eager to determine the source of Racine's success. Some of the relative ease of desegregation in Racine could be credited to its voluntary

nature. Because it was “not forced suddenly down the throats of citizens,” Superintendent Nelson maintained school desegregation in Racine did not inspire animosity as it did in other Northern cities. On the contrary, he said residents “were determined not to become another Boston,” referring to the racial discord that disrupted Boston schools.⁶⁵ After the plan was adopted, it was accepted by the community, even by those who had opposed it. Without a doubt, the city’s unified stance toward desegregation was instrumental to its success.

Another aspect attributed to the smooth implementation of desegregation was its relative gradualism. According to Nelson, time was a “key factor,” enabling the community and staff to “get used to the idea, read about it, and follow its planning process.” The two years granted to the district following the Berthelsen motion in 1973 was meant not to delay integration, but to permit the district to develop a plan “carefully, gradually, and with citizen input and cooperation.” These two years, Nelson said, also allowed for “a flurry of activity” aimed at “minimizing the culture shock” of integration.⁶⁶ Many teachers, administrators, bus drivers, and secretaries were unfamiliar with the unique cultural aspects of Racine African Americans. To breed a greater degree of familiarity, district personnel were required to attend seminars, workshops, and human relations training in preparation for the coming school year. During the summer, the district also planned activities—picnics, basketball camps, Milwaukee Brewers baseball games, swim parties—to give children an opportunity to mingle with their new classmates.⁶⁷

The two years following the Berthelsen motion also provided the district, the NAACP, and others time to build community support for the desegregation plan. The community, Nelson claimed, was the real reason desegregation in Racine was so successful. To illustrate this, he pointed to an August 1974 full-page advertisement in the *Racine Journal-Times*, just prior to the

board's vote on the selection of one of the four proposed desegregation plans. The advertisement, which included more than 230 signatures, endorsed the unequivocal desegregation of Racine schools. This visible sign of community support, Nelson said, was crucial to the successful implementation of desegregation. He called the community's commitment in spite of differences "the most essential resource of all" in the desegregation process.⁶⁸

Within the community, perhaps no one was more committed than Thomas. He spread his passion for "real freedom" throughout Racine, countering years of apathy and indifference. Tom White, former president of the Wisconsin NAACP, said of Thomas: "During crisis times, Julian [was] called upon for experience, not only by blacks but also by the total community."⁶⁹ Superintendent Nelson and other school officials, though sometimes at odds with Thomas, recognized and appreciated his strong, supportive leadership in the process of desegregation. They realized that without the positive force of Thomas and the NAACP, the racial accord established through school integration could never have been achieved in Racine. African Americans, on the other hand, were grateful for Thomas's great mental courage as he led them into the battle for "real freedom." To resolve the crisis of school segregation, Racine depended on Thomas, a leader who had the respect of the entire community.

In a 1979 speech, Thomas's esteemed colleague Superintendent Nelson described desegregation as "a very small down payment on an investment whose dividends are good education, citizenship, justice, and the welfare of the entire community."⁷⁰ At the time, very few cities in the North were willing to make this payment. Yet Racine, Wisconsin, because of its outstanding community support and extraordinary leadership, bought into desegregation, and once again became a "model for the nation."⁷¹

Notes

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Appendix

Table 1. African American student distribution

1965–66		1966–67	
Franklin	48.7*	Gifford	13.8
McKinley	6.9	McKinley	13.7
Mitchell	8.4	Mitchell	13.4
Washington	14.9	Washington	17.4

* African American students as percentage of total student population at given school

Source: "Desegregation Plan for Unified School District No. 1 of Racine County." National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Racine Branch: Records, 1954–1984. Box 16, Folder 4.

Figure 1. Julian Thomas



Photo courtesy of Oak Hill Museum Archives.
Source: <http://www.racinehistory.com/timeline2.htm>