

**EDUCATION**

# New Calm Marks Opening of Storm-Tossed Alabama School

By Drew Lindsay — September 07, 1994 ⌚ 6 min read

Not long ago, the most regular visitors to Wedowee, Ala., were anglers who came to troll the waters of nearby lakes.

But six months ago, a local high school principal's comments about interracial dating sparked a controversy that has brought unusual guests to the rural community of about 900 people. Among them have been federal investigators, Ku Klux Klan members, Black Panthers, and network correspondents.

Last month, violence arrived when a fire that authorities concluded was set by unknown arsonists gutted Randolph County High School.

In recent weeks, however, tensions have eased. Folks rallied to ready portable classrooms for the school's late-August opening.

"Things couldn't be going any smoother," said Lucille Burns, the recently appointed assistant principal at the high school.

This new harmony may be put to the test next month, when a federal court in Alabama is scheduled to hear discrimination charges brought against the district by the federal government.

Those charges shift Wedowee's focus from one man's words to the practices of an entire school system.

## A Principal's Comments

Hulond Humphries, the man at the center of the storm in Wedowee, last year marked more

than a quarter-century as the principal of Randolph County High School. He is such a local legend that the school's football stadium carries his name.

But last winter, with a few words, Mr. Humphries landed in the national spotlight. On Feb. 24, he called an assembly and canceled the school's prom because mixed-race couples planned to attend. Various students also said that he called a mixed-raced student "a mistake." (See Education Week, March 23, 1994.)

He retracted his decision the next day, but his comments set off a chain of events leading to Mr. Humphries's suspension, reinstatement, and eventual reassignment to an administrative post.

The comments also brought federal investigators to Wedowee and prompted the U.S. Justice Department to intervene. (See Education Week, May 25, 1994.)

The Justice Department has concluded that Mr. Humphries made derogatory statements about the mixed-raced student at the assembly. It also has charged that he disciplined black students more frequently and severely than whites.

Randolph County school officials have argued that Mr. Humphries's concerns over recent disturbances involving interracial dating were misunderstood in the confusion of the student assembly. A report by federal investigators about the incident also notes "noise and turmoil" at the assembly that "made it difficult to hear."

Regarding the discipline charges, district officials adopted a code of conduct that included specific punishments for specific offenses, according to George L. Beck Jr., the lawyer representing the district in the case.

Complaints probed in 1989 by the U.S. Education Department's office for civil rights "were fully addressed and answered in 1992," he said, "and the O.C.R. gave us a clean bill of health in June 1992."

## History of Complaints

The scope of the Justice Department case goes beyond Mr. Humphries, however.

In court filings, the department argues that the district has discriminated against blacks and violated its 1970 desegregation court order.

Roughly a quarter of the 2,400 students who attend the Randolph County schools are black, according to the Alabama education department. Yet the Justice Department found that the district's central-office staff, its principals, and its guidance counselors all are white.

Only three of the district's 35 bus drivers are black, and there are only a few blacks among the janitorial and cafeteria staffs.

Since the district was ordered to desegregate in 1970, the percentage of black teachers has dropped by more than 60 percent, according to the Justice Department.

"In short, the school district is white from top to bottom--with the exception of a small number of black teachers," the department states in court papers.

The papers also say the district "has generated a feeling of inferiority in black students that affects their motivation to learn."

Complaints of racial discrimination in the Randolph County schools have continued since the O.C.R.'s 1989 investigation.

One of those complaints charged the district with assigning disproportionate numbers of black students to special-education and Chapter 1 remedial classes.

Also, in April, Charlotte Clark-Frieson, the only black member of the Randolph County school board, filed a complaint charging that her fellow board members have "colluded" to keep information from her and even to try to unseat her.

In answer to the Justice Department, Mr. Beck said that when incidents of discrimination have been raised, the district has investigated and acted to comply with the 1970 order.

The district has recruited teachers and administrators from black colleges, but many candidates prefer to work in bigger, more urban districts, Mr. Beck said.

The hostile racial environment in Wedowee was due not to school officials but to outsiders

from groups such as the Black Panthers and the Ku Klux Klan, he said.

“The teachers and students that we’ve interviewed seemed to say that learning went on,” Mr. Beck said. “It was loud on the outside but quiet on the inside.”

## Worries About Unmet Goal

Wedowee’s troubles have coincided with growing fears that schools across the United States have fallen far short of the goal of full racial integration that many Americans hoped to achieve after the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In December, a Harvard University researcher published a study documenting that desegregation efforts are slipping, particularly in the South.

And in a speech delivered the same day that the Justice Department filed its case against Randolph County, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley pledged that the O.C.R. would tackle “second generation” desegregation issues.

The Justice Department case against Randolph County targets some of the issues raised by Secretary Riley, including racial harassment and the tracking of minorities into special education.

“It goes beyond the traditional scope of desegregation remedies to address the effects of the school district’s discriminatory policies,” according to Robert C. Howard, a lawyer who represented minority students in a desegregation suit in Rockford, Ill., last year.

Civil-rights advocates working in Wedowee hailed the efforts of Deval L. Patrick, the assistant U.S. attorney general for civil rights.

“I really commend Mr. Patrick for the fine job that he has done,” said Audrey C. Fisher, the education specialist for the Southeast regional office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Mr. Beck, however, suggested that the Justice Department brought the case, in part, because of the 40th anniversary of the *Brown* decision last May.

The case against the district was filed on the same date that the decision was handed down in 1954.

“We suspect that that has a lot to do with Justice’s serious involvement here,” Mr. Beck said.

All parties in the case said they hope to settle the case.

Ms. Frieson, a member of the school board for eight years and the local head of the N.A.A.C.P., said the case already has brought to a head issues that her late father first raised to school officials about 20 years ago. “Let’s go ahead and use this litigation as an opportunity to make this school system a better system,” Ms. Frieson said.

The district has committed to putting more African-Americans in leadership roles. Its first move was to make Ms. Burns, a black 1st-grade teacher, the high school’s assistant vice principal.

“I think we can always do better,” Mr. Beck said.

“Wedowee’s still changing,” said Ms. Fisher. “It takes on different dimensions from one day to another.”

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