



Figure 1: <https://www.starkvillesd.com/news/1744749/show-your-jacket-spirit-new-yellow-jacket-apparel-available-online>

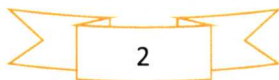
Yellow Jackets, Black and White: The Integration and Consolidation of Public Schools in Oktober County

Table of Contents

- 3) Introduction
- 5) Contextualizing the Primary Source
- 7) Highlights from the Source
- 10) Diving into the Source
- 13) The Significance
- 16) Further Reading



Figure 2: <https://www.starkvillesd.com/departments/communications/index>



Introduction



Figure 3: <https://mississippitoday.org/2016/07/19/starkville-school-merger-what-went-right/>



Figure 4: <https://cdispatch.com/news/2019-03-23/future-of-county-school-campuses-unclear/>

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in *Brown v. Board of Education* that public school segregation based on race was unconstitutional (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka). However, this did discourage those in favor of segregation, and their impacts were felt as close to home as right here in Oktibbeha County. Very soon after the ruling, school district boundaries here were redrawn such that most White students in the county, many of whom lived in the city of Starkville, would be allocated to the Starkville Public School District. At the same time, the surrounding communities and areas, comprised mainly of Black students, would be assigned to the Oktibbeha County School District (Lewis). The effects of this “segregation” would be felt into the 21st century.



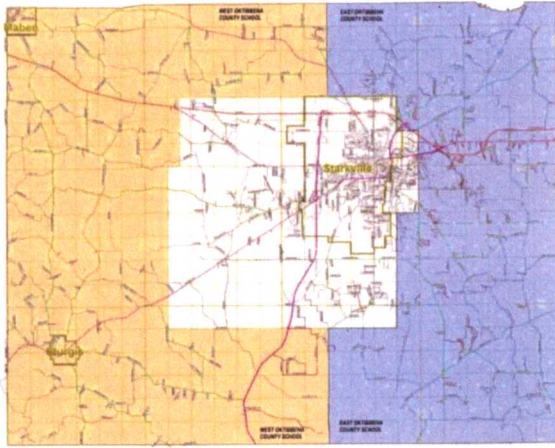


Figure 5: <https://cdispatch.com/news/2015-01-10/time-running-out-for-bond-petitioners/>

Following the integration, one of these districts would thrive while the other would not. Schools in the Starkville city district received more funding, better resources, more teachers, and modern facilities. However, the students in the county district were subject to inadequate facilities, inept administration, and minimal resources (Lewis). As schools in Starkville were continually recognized as performing highly, with one elementary school even receiving the National Blue Ribbon of Excellence honor in the 1990s (Office of Reform Assistance and Dissemination), the county district would end up being placed in state receivership twice and having “Academic Watch” status for a number of years (Lewis).

A Closer Perspective on School Consolidation

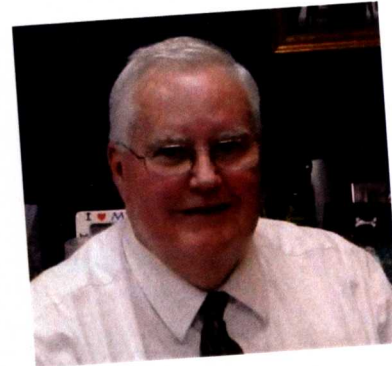


Figure 6: <https://starkvillecivilrights.msstate.edu/wordpress/people/>

Mr. Rex Buffington grew up in Meridian in the 1950s-70s, witnessed school integration in his 11th grade, was a journalism major at MSU, and worked as former Senator Stennis’ press secretary. He worked with the Starkville Chamber of Commerce to develop a pilot plan for consolidation of SPSD and OCSD, where students on the east side of the county would join SPSD, while students on the west side would attend a “demonstration” school supported by MSU. The Oktibbeha County board decided against this plan for fear of losing control over their schools and becoming less powerful than the city government, despite the receivership status of their district. The current plan that was implemented is not too different, except that the state legislature mandated it. Presently, the districts are merged, and every 5th and 6th grader in the city and county attends the Partnership School on MSU’s campus.



Mr. Buffington recorded an interview with Dr. Judy Ridner as part of the Starkville Civil Rights Project, an initiative led by the Mississippi State University Department of History in conjunction with the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Mississippi Humanities Council. The project highlights the experiences of struggles for African American equal rights with stories about overcoming injustice and facing opposition. Speaking to those interested in the history of the fight for equality in Oktibbeha County, Mr. Buffington, who formerly served as the director of the MSU Stennis Center, recounts his experiences with school integrations and consolidations.

'A Shaky Truce': Starkville Civil Rights Struggles,
1960-1980

Through oral history interviews and digitized archival documents, this site highlights the civil rights story in Starkville, MS, and the voices of its participants.

Figure 7: <https://starkvillecivilrights.msstate.edu/wordpress/>



Selected Quotes from Mr. Buffington's Interview

5:41 "It wasn't really the integration itself that changed things, it was the reaction...by the school administrators and the parents"

9:59: "I think one of the things that sort of dawned on me early on in the process was that my African American classmates were not any happier about it than we were"



35:58: “[Senator Stennis] said that his best friend and playmate as a little boy was an African-American”

46:12: “A lot of it’s about revenue...it made [the county] schools almost completely African American”

48:33 (about OCSD): “Poor academic performance...but also they were in bad trouble financially, you know, it was all tied together”

49:43: “These children, there was nothing wrong with them, they were capable and able to learn, it’s just that they weren’t getting an opportunity, and it was because of their address”

58:07: “This time, everybody is seeing the potential for how much stronger we can be together”

1:17:11: “Our superintendent said, you know, the kids are doing things that we have never been able to do”



Figure 8: <https://cdispatch.com/news/2013-09-13/school-report-cards-issued-oktibbeha-county-starkville-both-earn-c-rating/>

4:03: “Looking back on it, I don’t know why I was so concerned about [my school’s integration], except that it was change, it was different, it was the unknown.”

- The repetition/anaphora of “it was” emphasizes the status quo of how experiences were in 1970. While Mr. Buffington, as well as many other people, have realized that the concerns over integration were unfounded, that is not the case universally, as evidenced a bit farther north in Mississippi than where he grew up outside of Meridian.

1:11:47: “I do really believe our schools are going to be better and stronger together than we ever could’ve been apart.”

- Mr. Buffington’s choice to say “our schools” and immediately refer to them as “we” ties in and underscores the

significance of the community in education and public schools. Without the united effort of the community coming together, the schools cannot come together, and an adequate education cannot come together. The belief in the value of public education that Mr. Buffington is conveying, that every child, regardless of background, should have access to quality schooling, further underscores the relevance of community effort in education. Moreover, he is seeking to embolden efforts to make public schools better. His arguments against racist critics who were against letting black children receive an equal education to white children are indirect yet salient in his words.



Both of these excerpts from Mr. Buffington’s interview emphasize community involvement in how schools operate and their success. His avoidance of calling out specific individuals or entities in why things happened or were the way they were serves to draw in the listener to understand the importance of the commonality

in integrating and consolidating schools. In fact, Mr. Buffington's diction helps to draw the listener in and make them feel included in the issues at hand, even if they have no other connection to Mississippi or education. He tied his personal experiences as a student to how his mindset changed as his life did, to how he became a leader and champion of equitable education in Oktibbeha County. Although he himself is not African-American, his desire to share his message in such a powerful and espousing manner shines a light on the relevance of this issue for all people. Furthermore, this put him in a unique position with the power to make change. As a White person, his demonstration of allyship toward the Black students was very salient. It brought to the issue more prominence and empathy such that more individuals of all races bolstered the consolidation of the school districts to make one that was improved for everyone.

The Significance & Relevance Today

Although conditions for all public school students in Oktibbeha County are more equitable today, there was a backlash against the consolidation movement originally. Efforts to combine the district failed in both 1993 and 2013 until the state government mandated they combine in 2015 (Grant).



Figure 9: <https://www.starkvillesd.com/starkville-high-school/>

The majority of the pushback came from people with some investment in the Starkville Public School District (parents of students, community leaders, etc.). The opposition also came from the board and administration of the county schools, who wanted to maintain control and power (Smith). However, on the whole, students appreciated the more significant social opportunities, increased academic rigor, more robust athletic programs,

and more that resulted from the consolidation (Grant). In fact, this encouraged many parents, especially those zoned to the county, to transfer their students out of private schools into the consolidated public district (Grant).



Figure 10: <https://www.starkvillesd.com/AcademicHouses>

However, this model of consolidation hasn't been implemented everywhere it's needed. For example, in neighboring Lowndes County, the Columbus Municipal School District is still separate from the Lowndes County School District. While the racial disparities are not as pronounced there, there are still struggles between the city and county school district, much as there was in Oktibbeha County before the consolidation. However, it is essential to note that the situation in Lowndes County is unique and cannot be generalized from what happened here. Yet, it is salient to know that even today, the struggles that once plagued schools in Oktibbeha County pervade less than 30 miles away from here.

There is still more work to be done toward true equality for all people here in Starkville, too. Mr. Rex Buffington currently serves as a co-leader of the Starkville-Oktibbeha Unity League (SOUL). This group works to promote civil rights and justice through education, community events, and advocacy (Starkville Oktibbeha Unity League). Efforts to address inequalities in all aspects of life in Oktibbeha County are in the works at SOUL. However, it is refreshing to see all students learning in an environment where they can thrive.



Figure 11: <https://www.starkvillesd.com/news/1629432/yes-program-expands-to-sudduth-elementary-school>

Further Reading

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. No. 483.
U.S. Supreme Court. 1954.

Buffington, Rex. *Starkville Civil Rights* Judy Ridner.
11 December 2014. Video.
<https://youtu.be/6pEBqS3CBG8>.

Fleming, David J. "Five Miles Away, A World
Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the
Story of Educational Opportunity in
Modern America." *Political Science Quarterly*
(*Academy of Political Science*) 127.1 (2012):
163-165. EBSCOhost.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2012.tb02231.x>.

Grant, Richard. "Starkville school merger: What
went right?" 9 July 2016. *Mississippi Today*.
Article.
<https://mississippitoday.org/2016/07/19/starkville-school-merger-what-went-right/>.

Lewis, Nicole. "What happens when two separate
and unequal school districts merge?" 3
October 2016. *The Hechinger Report*. Article.
<https://hechingerreport.org/what-happens-when-two-separate-and-unequal-school-districts-merge/>.

Mississippi Professional Educators. "School District
Consolidation in Mississippi." n.d. *Internet
Archive*. Document.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20170702083623/https://mpe.org/mpe/documents/Consolidation.Final.pdf>.

Mississippi State University Department of History.
*'A Shaky Truce': Starkville Civil Rights
Struggles, 1960-1980*. n.d. 29 April 2023.
<https://starkvillecivilrights.msstate.edu/worpress/>.

Office of Reform Assistance and Dissemination.
"Blue Ribbon Schools Program: Schools
Recognized 1982-1983 Through 1999-
2002." n.d. *U.S. Department of Education*.
Document. 25 April 2023.
<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs/list-1982.pdf>.

Smith, Carl. "Starkville opposition mounts against
school consolidation." 23 February 2013.
The Commercial Dispatch. Article.
<https://cdispatch.com/news/2013-02-23/starkville-opposition-mounts-against-school-consolidation/>.

Starkville Oktibbeha Unity League. n.d. Facebook. 25
April 2023.
<https://www.facebook.com/starkvillesoul/>