

LESSON

Desegregation of Hoxie Schools

Courtesy: Dr. Jerry Vervack and the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture, <http://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>

During the summer and autumn of 1955, proponents and opponents of school integration across America were watching what Cabell Phillips of the *New York Times* called “a battle in a test tube.” The scene of the “battle” was Hoxie (Lawrence County), a small community in the northeastern part of Arkansas. Phillips’s dispatches turned the isolated rural town into a focal point for the nation. While not the earliest instance of desegregation in the state—Fayetteville (Washington County) and Charleston (Franklin County) were peacefully integrated the previous year—Hoxie’s attempt was the first to be met with active resistance.

In 1955, Hoxie, with its population of 1,855 residents, was a collection of one- and two-story structures strung along the tracks of the Missouri Pacific and the St. Louis and San Francisco (Frisco) railroads. Hoxie schools followed the practice of splitting the fall school term to allow pupils to pick cotton in late September and October. There was one poorly maintained elementary school for fewer than thirty African-American children, while those of high school age were bused to an all-black school in Jonesboro (Craighead County). School was scheduled to begin on July 11, 1955, and in accordance with a unanimous vote by the school board, the Hoxie School District, believing it did not have the funds to maintain separate schools, moved to abolish its dual educational system by integrating black children into its previously all-white schools, made up of approximately 1000 white children. Twenty-five black children initially registered; however, several dropped their enrollment, leaving twenty-one students to attend on the first day of classes. The superintendent of schools, Kunkel Edward Vance, had given three reasons for integration: it was “right in the sight of God,” it complied with the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, and it saved money. Vance said all school facilities would be integrated, not just the classrooms, and on the morning of July 11, 1955, the black children came to the white Hoxie schools. No incidents occurred on the first day of integration, and from initial appearances, Hoxie was a successful effort at school integration in Arkansas. On Monday, July 25, 1955, however, the situation changed as the latest issue of *Life* magazine appeared on newsstands across America. The intent of *Life*’s pictorial essay was to recognize a small Southern community’s efforts toward compliance with the law. The effect, however, was a spotlight on Hoxie, which attracted the vocal ire of segregationists in the community, and soon in the state and region.

On August 3, 1955, approximately 350 segregationists from the local area gathered in Hoxie City Hall to protest the desegregation of Hoxie schools. They passed a resolution vowing not to patronize or support the Hoxie schools, and a boycott of the schools began the next day. Segregationists announced that half of the white student population remained at home, although Superintendent Vance, while not issuing the actual figures, disputed that claim. The situation in Hoxie gained attention elsewhere as segregationists throughout Arkansas viewed integration in Hoxie as a test and prepared for confrontation with the Hoxie School Board, which remained

resolute in its decision to integrate. The first outsiders came to Hoxie on August 13, 1955, when the Little Rock (Pulaski County) chapter of White America sent two representatives to a segregationist rally in Hoxie. At that rally, a petition with more than 1000 signatures was presented requesting the resignation of all five members of the school board. The board members did not resign and voted to stand by their original decision. The Walnut Ridge (Lawrence County) newspaper serving Hoxie, *The Times Dispatch*, stated in its August 18 edition, "Hoxie battle lines drawn as both sides stand firm in integration dispute."

Arkansas governor Orval Faubus informed the Hoxie School Board that the state government would not intervene there or in any school district. The refusal of the state government to become involved was a blow to the school board, which was looking for support as outsiders came to Hoxie from other Arkansas towns and from other southern states. Even in the face of outside influences, the majority of Hoxie's citizens, both black and white, refused to respond to any racial harassment and waited for a peaceful resolution of the issue. Fortunately, harassment remained only vocal, and it was limited. Confrontation between the school board and the segregationists moved to the courtroom.

The Hoxie School Board forced the issue of racial integration into the courts by filing suit against the segregationist leaders both from Hoxie and elsewhere in the state. The complaint alleged that operation of integrated schools was effective until the defendants began to challenge the board's action. The school officials charged the segregationists, in their efforts to thwart integration in Hoxie, with trespassing on school property, threatening picket lines, organizing boycotts, and intimidating school officials. In November 1955, Federal District Judge Thomas C. Trimble ruled that pro-segregation forces had "planned and conspired" to prevent integration in Hoxie, and he issued a temporary restraining order against the segregationists. A hearing to make an injunction against the segregationists permanent was held in December 1955. The court ruled that the school board could have been criminally and civilly liable if it had failed to integrate and that a permanent injunction against the segregationists was in order. The day after the decision, Vance resigned, admitting the integration crisis played a large part in his decision.

The segregationists appealed the decision to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. The U.S. Department of Justice, through the office of Attorney General Herbert Brownell, entered the case on the side of the Hoxie School Board. This was the first intervention by the attorney general in support of any school district trying to comply with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. On October 25, 1956, the court ruled in favor of the Hoxie School.

The segregationists' setback at Hoxie was a turning point in their efforts to prevent integration in Arkansas. Because efforts to pressure the school board had failed, the strategy of segregationists changed. No longer would school boards be the primary target, but rather Arkansas politicians. Certainly, the events surrounding the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in 1957 serve as the prime example. Governor Faubus, rather than the local school board, was thrown into the spotlight of national and world attention and succumbed to segregationist pressure. However, just as in Hoxie, the segregationists' strategy, in all its forms, ultimately failed.

For additional information:

Appleby, David, producer. *Hoxie: The First Stand*. PBS Documentary. 2003.

Hill Foundation Hoxie 21 Collection. Crossroads to Freedom.
<http://www.crossroadstofreedom.org/detail.collection?oid=15> (accessed June 6, 2007).

“The Integration of Hoxie: A Panel Discussion.” *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* 35 (December 2004): 188–203.

Peltason, J. W. *Fifty-Eight Lonely Men*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961.

Phillips, Cabell. “Integration: Battle of Hoxie, Arkansas.” *New York Times Magazine* 25 (September 1955): 12.

Vervack, Jerry. “Road to Armageddon: *Arkansas and Brown v. Board of Education*, May 17, 1954, to September 2, 1957.” MA thesis, University of Arkansas, 1978.

———. “The Hoxie Imbrolio.” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 48 (Spring 1989): 17–33.

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Please note:

The lesson plan is suggestive of a beginning point for teachers. Teachers are advised to modify to meet their specific classroom needs.

LESSON PLAN

Lesson: Desegregation of Hoxie Schools

Recommended grade levels: 9-10

Time required: 2-3 class periods of 50 minutes duration

Curriculum fit: Arkansas History

Arkansas History Curriculum Frameworks:

WWP.9.AH.9-12.4

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- demonstrate comprehension of the racial attitudes that prevailed during the mid-twentieth century in Arkansas in the form of an interview.
- demonstrate comprehension of the desegregation of Hoxie schools in the form of an interview.

Procedure:

Phase 1: Group Activity: Brainstorming Questions

- 1) Instruct and assist students to read the lesson, *Desegregation of Hoxie Schools*.
- 2) Divide the class into two groups—Group A and Group B.
- 3) Ask Group A to imagine that they are residents of Hoxie during 1955-1956. Ask Group B to imagine that they are news reporters covering the desegregation of Hoxie schools.
- 4) Instruct Group A to study the lesson carefully to answer the questions of the news reporters.
- 5) Instruct Group B to write down a set of 10 questions to ask Group A (the Hoxie residents) about the desegregation of Hoxie schools.
- 6) Provide feedback to Group B about their questions.
- 7) Supervise that each student in Group B has a list of ten fine-tuned questions.

Phase 2: Paired Activity: Interviewing Session

- 1) Pair together a student each from Group A and Group B.
- 2) Ask students from Group B to interview their partners from Group A.

Phase 3: Presentation and Feedback

- 1) Call a few student-pairs to the front of the class to present question 1 and their answers. Provide feedback.
- 2) Repeat the above step with different student-pairs until all ten questions are presented to the class.

Desegregation of Hoxie Schools

ASSESSMENT

| |
|---|
| 1. Hoxie is in _____ County. |
| A. Lawrence |
| B. Lee |
| C. Little River |
| D. Lonoke |
| |
| 2. The places that integrated schools peacefully in Arkansas in the year 1954 were: |
| A. Farmington and Charleston |
| B. Fayetteville and Clarksville |
| C. Farmington and Clarksville |
| D. Fayetteville and Charleston |
| |
| 3. Why did Hoxie schools split the fall school term? |
| A. to celebrate Halloween |
| B. to pick cotton in late September and October |
| C. to celebrate Thanksgiving |
| D. to build rail tracks |
| |
| 4. Until 1955, where did African American students of Hoxie attend High School? |
| A. Johnson |
| B. Jasper |
| C. Jonesboro |
| D. Jefferson |
| |
| 5. The first day of peaceful school integration took place at Hoxie on: |
| A. July 10, 1955 |
| B. July 11, 1955 |
| C. July 25, 1955 |
| D. July 26, 1955 |
| |
| 6. According to the lesson, an essay in which periodical started the school integration-related protest at Hoxie? |
| A. <i>New York Times</i> |
| B. <i>Life</i> |
| C. <i>The Times Dispatch</i> |
| D. All of the above |
| |

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| 7. What was the court's decision in the Hoxie school integration case in November 1955? |
| A. Issue a temporary restraining order against the segregationists |
| B. Issue a permanent injunction against the segregationists |
| C. The school officials had to be free of the pressure from the segregationists |
| D. None of the above |
| |
| 8. What was the court's decision in the Hoxie school integration case on October 25, 1956? |
| A. Issue a temporary restraining order against the segregationists |
| B. Issue a permanent injunction against the segregationists |
| C. The school officials had to be free of the pressure from the segregationists |
| D. None of the above |

READING OPEN-RESPONSE ITEM

Using details from the lesson, describe the November 1955, December 1955, and October 1956 legal cases.

RUBRIC FOR READING OPEN-RESPONSE ITEM

| SCORE | DESCRIPTION |
|----------|---|
| 4 | The response clearly describes all three cases. |
| 3 | The response clearly describes all three cases, but some part of the discussion is unclear. |
| 2 | The response clearly describes two cases. |
| 1 | The response clearly describes one case. |
| 0 | The response is incorrect or irrelevant. |
| B | Blank – No Response. A score of “B” will be reported as “NA” (No Attempt – Zero Score). |

Desegregation of Hoxie Schools

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

| | |
|--|---|
| Abolish | put an end to; do away with completely |
| Accordance | in agreement |
| Alleged | to accuse someone of something |
| Civil Case (as in Civilly liable) | a case before the law court to protect the rights of a person for a wrong done to him or her by another person or government or organization |
| Criminal Case (as in Criminally liable) | a case concerning an illegal act considered harmful to the general public |
| Desegregation | removing barriers to equal treatment and opportunities for groups who have been discriminated against because of racial or cultural differences. This term is frequently used when referring to integrating public schools. Often desegregation resulted from legal action. |
| Dispatches | reports |
| Filing suit | the act of turning in a complaint to a law court. Typically Person A, who has suffered emotional, financial, or physical loss because of Person B's actions, files in his or her complaint about Person B to a court of law. |
| Initially | at first; at the beginning |
| Injunction | a court order stopping a person or organization from doing something |
| Integration | another term used for desegregation |
| Intervention | purposefully becoming involved in a difficult situation, in order to improve it or prevent it from getting worse |
| Liable | being responsible for something or someone, as stated by the law |
| Patronize | support |
| Pictorial | of pictures; visual |
| Resolution | an official decision that is made after a group or organization has voted |
| Succumbed | give in; to give way to a personal force |
| Thwart | stop; put an end to |
| Unanimous | everybody agreeing to something |