

THE DUNBAR STORY:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE SCHOOL'S SEARCH FOR
EXCELLENCE IN A SEGREGATED SOCIETY

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregated public education represented an implicit badge of racial inferiority. In the years following this decision, there has been an ongoing struggle to eliminate the inequality in educational opportunity throughout the country. As a result, many all-black schools have been eliminated.

Many Americans, both black and white, view the demise of the all black school with satisfaction. For them, the all-black school was a constant reminder of racial prejudice and exploitation. Segregated schools were an outgrowth of the second class citizenship forced upon American blacks. The end of forced segregation was looked upon as an occasion for equality of opportunity and full citizenship for people of all races.

However, many other Americans, both black and white, viewed the end of the all black school in quite a different way. In the years following the Civil War, formal education for American blacks developed into an extremely important and valued social institution. Within the black community, it rivaled the family and the church in importance. The credit for economic, political, and social gains among blacks was often given to the black school. It is sometimes argued that the all black school provides children with the opportunity to learn, to develop leadership skills, and to mature, free from some of the strains and tension that often accompanies minority status in a desegregated school. In addition, some say black schools serve as a source of identity, unity, and pride.

Is the all-black school a symbol of racial degradation and exploitation or is it a major source of strength for blacks? Could it be both? The program you are about to see and hear will deal with these questions and others by describing the history and experience of a single black school, Dunbar High School in Lynchburg, Virginia. The material for this program was gathered in a series of interviews with students, parents, teachers, and administrators whose experiences with Dunbar span the school's entire forty-seven year history.

4 Dunbar High School opened its doors to students in 1923. The school represented the fulfillment of a request by the black community to the all white school board to create a new black high school. 5 Located at 12th and Polk Streets, the school was named for the black American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar. In the early years, the Dunbar faculty ~~was~~ ^{was} primarily ~~white~~ ^{black}. 6 Students from the 1920's remember the faculty as formal, well-educated, and kindly. 7 The curriculum in the early years reflected the classical tradition. 8 In order to graduate, a student had to take four years of English, Mathematics, History, Science and Latin. 9 The curriculum was extremely successful in preparing graduates for college. 10 As many as 90 per cent of the students in the graduating classes from the 1920's enrolled in colleges.

11 However, the classical curriculum had little appeal or relevance to large numbers of high school aged blacks. Only two generations out of slavery and living in a rigidly segregated community, many teenaged blacks were economically unable or insufficiently motivated to attend high school. In the beginning, Dunbar High School was a school for a small, elite group of students whose parents recognized the value of formal education and had the means to see that their children took advantage of it.

The students from those early years remember the rules that kept boys and girls apart in the classroom and on the playground. They remember the dress codes which required the girls to wear neatly pressed dresses and the boys to wear coats and ties. They remember the lunches prepared by the home economics students and eaten outside.

¹²The decade of the 1930's was a period of rapid change for Dunbar High School. While the school remained under the authority of the all white school board, the positions of leadership and authority within the school were gradually occupied by blacks, including that of principalship.

¹³Clarence Williams Seay, who had first come to Dunbar as a teacher and coach, returned to the school in 1938 as Dunbar's principal. He filled that position until his retirement in 1968, a 30 year period of dynamic leadership which saw the institution achieve academic excellence in spite of segregation barriers. More than any other person, Mr. Seay was responsible for molding and directing Dunbar High School. Through his hard work, devotion, and vision, Dunbar became what Mr. Seay referred to as a "community school."

¹⁴At the heart of the "community school" concept was the goal to create a program and mold a staff that could meet the needs of all the black youth in Lynchburg and at the same time offer cultural, athletic, and educational programs to the entire community. One of Mr. Seay's most important steps ¹⁵was to actively recruit the best qualified teachers and administrators available. Recruiting trips were made throughout Virginia and surrounding states.

¹⁶With a larger and more diverse faculty, the curriculum at Dunbar was expanded. ^{17, 18, 19}The established classical program became the college preparatory program and was joined by more general and vocationally oriented programs in such areas as clerical studies, ²⁰commercial foods, ²¹

home economics, and the mechanical and building trades. With this expansion of the curriculum, and increasingly larger number of Lynchburg teenagers entered high school and graduated. Accreditation for the expanded curriculum was achieved by the 1950's.

In addition to the growth of the academic program, the 1930's were characterized by significant growth in extra-curricular activities. Dunbar became the focal point for the entire black community. Black families came to hear the Dunbar choir, or attend sporting events such as football and basketball and eventually tennis and track events, or to see plays or to take part in the Hippodrome.

The rapid growth of the 1930's was accompanied by the need for additional financial support. With little additional support available from the school board, the black community accepted this responsibility. In 1934, black citizens formed the Dunbar Parent-Teachers Association. The PTA was to play a vital role in the life of Dunbar High School.

Some of its members remained active in the organization from its inception until its demise in 1970. Mr. H. A. M. Johns, one of the PTA organizers, served as its president for nearly thirty years. The PTA, dedicated to attaining accreditation for Dunbar and to maintaining a first-class educational institution, was the mainstay behind the expansion of Dunbar's extra-curricular activities. Bake sales, raffles, newspaper drives and soliciting business sponsors were common techniques to raise funds for such necessities as library books, band uniforms and instruments, athletic equipment, and stage curtains.

As Dunbar High School entered the 1940's, not even a World War could overshadow the great advances that were being made at the school.

When the war ended in 1945 and the country returned to peacetime status, Dunbar began its "golden age." This period of remarkable achievement and community pride was to last well into the 1960's.

47 Those were the years of new buildings at Dunbar, the years of national and state championships in athletics. Dunbar graduates were going on to college at the nation's most prestigious schools and achieving positions of local, state, and national prominence. Dunbar graduates could be found as leaders in areas such as medicine, law, education, civil service, the arts and athletics. Those were the years of homecoming parades through the center of Lynchburg and senior proms in the gym. Dunbar had firmly established itself as a "community school" and had become a vital and cherished institution within the black community.

74 Until the late 1940's the Dunbar Library was a "branch" of Jones Memorial Library, a private, segregated institution. The Dunbar "branch", under the leadership of Mrs. Anne Spencer, received books mostly fiction and many of them used. FROM Jones Memorial, Dunbar students were not permitted to borrow books directly from the Jones Memorial Library. In 1946, the PTA took responsibility for raising money for a school library.

76 Most would agree that the excellence achieved at Dunbar was due primarily to its faculty. Students recall them as men and women who were larger than life, dedicated and hard-working. Each seemed to accept responsibility for aiding and encouraging students to do their best no matter the background. The teachers are remembered as ready and willing to perform any needed task from collecting tickets at athletic events, to sewing costumes for stage productions, to giving private instruction to students who needed that extra push for college.

⁸⁵ In the 1940's and 50's Dunbar High School was still a racially segregated institution. Throughout its history, the students and faculty recall very little contact with the white community of Lynchburg. There is some evidence that, at least economically, Dunbar was not receiving equal treatment by city officials. ⁸⁶ For example, long after the white high school students were provided with transportation, the black students had to travel to school as best they could. Items such as athletic equipment which were routinely purchased with school funds at the white high school were not in the budget at Dunbar. In spite of this unequal treatment, some considered Dunbar's program equal if not superior to the white high school.

The City of Lynchburg as a whole remained a segregated community.

⁸⁷ Dunbar teachers recall counseling many of their students to seek jobs and make their lives in the less segregated cities of the northeast.

⁸⁸ It was widely recognized among blacks that there were limited opportunities available to them in the Lynchburg economy. ⁸⁹ Some Lynchburg residents, both black and white, view this forced exodus of many of the brightest young blacks as one of the greatest tragedies of segregation. ⁹⁰ It denied Lynchburg the talents of these people and often separated permanently sons and daughters from their families.

⁹¹ For Dunbar graduates, Washington, D. C., was the most common destination. The number who moved to that area was so large and the loyalty to their school so strong that even now they sponsor annually "Lynchburg Day" attracting Dunbar students from all over the country.

~~X~~ The 1954 Supreme Court decision did not bring immediate change to Dunbar High School. Those at Dunbar in 1954, remember receiving word of the decision and feeling a sense of victory. But there was no

expectation of immediate change and none came.

It was not until the early 1960's, that the 1954 Decision was felt in Lynchburg as a consequence of a lawsuit filed by members of the black community. Virginia had resisted desegregation as long as possible. Within the black community the debate over desegregation was sometimes bitter and for some the consequences painful. To achieve the goal of desegregation put the existence of Dunbar High School in jeopardy. The pattern of achieving desegregation throughout the South was for the existing white school to absorb the black students. Usually the black high school disappeared.

Was achieving desegregation worth losing Dunbar?

Few blacks favored continued segregation. Some favored the transfer of black students to the white school. Others argued that desegregation could be achieved by bringing whites to Dunbar. The decision which was finally made resulted in the end of Dunbar as a high school in 1970.

⁹²Looking back at the forty-seven years of Dunbar's existence, there can be no doubt that the benefits to its students and the black community were numerous. Dunbar not only educated its students but instilled in them high values and lofty goals. At the time, Dunbar was the primary source of cultural and athletic activities for the black community.

⁹³The loyalty of its alumni and the place it holds in the memory of the entire black community are testimony to its impact.

⁹⁴ It has now been more than ten years since Dunbar High School closed its doors. When asked to evaluate the closing of the school, former students and teachers identify both negative and positive consequences. Most said that the current generation of black teenagers is being deprived of the benefits that were theirs at Dunbar. ⁹⁵ Although desegregation has

resulted in improved physical facilities and resources for black students, what has been lost are those essential qualities summed up in the idea of the "Dunbar family" ---a heritage not to be forgotten.