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Letter to John C. Stennis, March 2, 1953

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DEKALB, MISSISSIPPI

March 2, 1953

Honorable John C. Stennis
United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

Dear Friend:

Despite the fact that I so rudely failed to reply to your letter in December, it provoked a great deal of apprehension and activity on my part. At that time I did not reply for the simple reason that I did not then, nor do I now, know the answer to the question you had in mind.

However, your letter of February 24 finds me in a somewhat better position to discuss the question with at least a semblance of intelligence. Following your letter in December I talked with a number of other teachers who have what I believe to be useful and reasonable ideas on the subject. Let it be said here that our more intelligent Negroes realize that the sad plight of their children will be aggravated many times, if they are forced to occupy the same classrooms with children of our race.

The following is a rough composite of the thinking of the other school people I have talked with on the subject of what we can, and should, do in the event of an unfavorable ruling from the Supreme Court on the pending question of segregation of races in public schools.

School districts could be organized for the purpose of administration and supervision to include all races, with the Board of Education of such a district elected by the qualified electors of the district. Any qualified elector would be eligible to serve on this board, without regard to race. The board would have full authority in the matter of designating pupil attendance to the several attendance centers (individual or local schools) within the district. Of course, no center could be designated as a school for any peculiar race, but separate school centers would be provided for the convenience of both races. Parents of children would have the right of appeal to the board of education in the matter of transfer from one attendance center to another. This would put the matter of school center attendance on a more or less personal choice basis, and the theory is that tradition and convention would carry out the desired solution. After all, is there ^{a more} impelling influence than that of custom? Certainly, we would under such a provision afford comparable facilities within each school district. Too long have we been looking for excuses for not doing this very thing. I recall you once said that we have been anti Christian in that we have provided educational opportunities for our white children to the neglect of those of our other race.

Recently I have had the opportunity to talk with Negro groups, both parents and teachers, about this situation, and I find ~~them~~ ^{they} much more concerned and fearful of it than most whites. ~~They~~ ^{They} know

that discrimination and segregation will begin in its most dangerous form if their children are forced by court order into the same school with people of another race. As one Negro layman in the Porterville community expressed it, "What could be more pitiful than a few underprivileged colored children in the same school with white children ---- being denied the right to play with them? This would be real segregation". The Negro teachers are first to realize that their future as teachers would be hopeless, should segregation be forced on the two races.

In your letter of February 24 you asked of the status of the special session (proposed) of the Mississippi Legislature. Governor White has seen fit to wait for the Supreme Court's decision on the matter in question before calling this special session. Although it is an unpopular thought among school people, I feel that the governor is correct in his attitude. Then too, he must be somewhat provoked by the attitude shown by a number of school people and agencies when the findings of the legislative recess committee indicated that a number of irregularities existed in the matter of pupil accounting over the state. No doubt he feels that the defense offered by these individuals and groups could be interpreted only in terms of selfish dishonesty. How we are going to regain "face" after this exposure is the "sixty-four dollar question". It appears to me that it is the guilty parties who are now so critical toward the governor for not calling the special session.

In your first letter you mentioned that possibly some group should be working on a plan of action in view of the possible undesired ruling of the Court. Certainly you are correct in your opinion, but we are faced with the all important question of how such a study group could be formed. For obvious reasons (at least they are obvious to me) the M. E. A. could ^{not} sponsor such a study with any degree of acceptance by the public at large and the legislature. The governor must know any number of loyal and capable school men in the state who would be glad to ^{no} devote their time and abilities to such a cause. Personally, I know of ^{no} service that I would appreciate the opportunity of rendering more than such as this. If you still think well of the idea, and agree with me that Governor White should select the personnel, would you make such a suggestion to him? I know that he must hold you in the highest esteem, and would appreciate the fact that you are motivated purely by your interest in public education.

It is encouraging to learn that the vocational group will have you with them in their sectional meeting during the M. E. A. My only regret is that we will not have you in one of the general sessions. So far as my ideas on points of your speech, which would be helpful to these people, I know that you are much more competent to recognize these needs than I. No doubt you will call their attention to the all important consideration of practical teachings of the basic needs of the home and farm life. Sometimes I am inclined to believe that these people are "up in the clouds" with their teachings to the extent that boys often finish courses in vocational agriculture

without any basic conception of what a practical farm program would be for his particular situation, and girls finish in homemaking with the abilities to prepare the most tempting salads but without the know-how for **baking southern biscuits** and making brown ham gravy. In all seriousness, the vocational people are doing an excellent job, and they enjoy the finest of supervision on the state level.

Thank you for your interest in my family. We are all in the best of health and still happy in our service to the DeKalb School community. I will always be grateful to you and Mrs. Stennis for the impetus you gave our program in getting it started. Carolyn and I think that our boy and girl are rewards greater than we deserve. John is developing to a fine musician and Mary Jane is the prettiest girl in town ----- at least that is the way I vote. We are all looking forward to the summer vacation when you and yours will be in the community again. Margaret Jane and Hamp are two of the wonderful young people that I take a small, but invaluable, claim in. This final word in closing (at last), and I hope that you will take it for what it is worth. At all times remember the hazards of overwork and worry, to which a man in your position and of your disposition is often vulnerable.

Your friend,

