

STAFF REPORT: EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Among the factors affecting the economic security of black persons in non-metropolitan areas the Commission examined vocational and elementary and secondary school education.

The testimony at the hearing and the preparatory staff investigation disclosed that the educational system is failing to provide black students with the education or skills needed to obtain a decent job, and is perpetuating black poverty and economic dependency. Many young people are leaving the area and migrating to the cities, but they are not equipped with any salable skills.

For many Negro children basic preconditions of learning are absent—food to nourish the body, shoes and clothes to wear, freedom from the need to work during school hours to help support a poor family. But the school system is failing to educate black children who do attend school and whose physical condition permits them to learn.

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

School achievement.—One measure of the success of an educational system is the extent to which students master the subject matter of instruction. In the hearing area large disparities in achievement exist between black and white students. These differences are revealed by school achievement data collected in the Office of Education study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (known as the Coleman Report). Data available is for black and white students in the rural South compared to the average scores for white students in the urban North. Marked disparities in achievement between white and black students at three grade levels (grades 6, 9 and 12) on three types of standardized tests were found. For example, by grade 12, black students in the rural South were 6.2 grade levels behind white students in the urban North in math achievement while white students in the rural South were only 1.4 grade levels behind. For verbal ability by grade 12, black students were 5.2 grade levels behind (white 1.5), while in reading comprehension black students were 4.9 grade levels behind (white 1.0).¹

The preconditions of learning

Testimony at the hearing disclosed that for many impoverished black citizens of the State the basic preconditions of learning were lacking. Mrs. Rebecca Ward of Akron, Alabama, for example, testified that she had 10 children and one grandchild living with her. She earned \$12 per week in addition to her welfare check of \$26 per month. Because she was unable to afford shoes and clothes for her children to wear, four of her children had not attended school on a regular basis during the past year. Other witnesses at the hearing also testified that inadequate clothes and shoes for their children had forced them to keep their children out of school. Some had difficulty getting enough money to provide lunch for their children at school.

Dr. Alan C. Mermann, an Assistant Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at the Yale Medical School, examined more than 700 children in Lowndes County during the summer of 1966. He found that more than 80 percent of the children he examined suffered from anemia—a shortage of iron in the blood—which he attributed mainly to bad nutrition, but also to poor medical care and worm infestation. In his words, “. . . many of these people have about approximately two-thirds of the amount of red blood that the Commissioners have. I think one begins to see emerging from this the reason why children are asleep in the classes.” The fatigue, caused by the small oxygen-carrying capacity, he stated, helped explain why large numbers of children participating in a summer program were asleep on the floor at 10:00 in the morning.

Another serious handicap was brought out by Miss Sadie Allen, an honor student at Southside High School in Greenville, Alabama, who explained her

¹ See Appendix E.