

# The 1970 Russell-South Fulton High School Consolidation: An Overview

by

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Russell High School became fully integrated in the fall of 1970. This event was part of an overarching plan to desegregate all of the Fulton County Schools to comply with a court-ordered mandate to sufficiently integrate black and white students throughout the district. While compliance with the court order was accomplished primarily with changes in Fulton County's school zones, the method of integration at Russell High involved "pairing" with all-black South Fulton High School. This plan resulted in the merging of South Fulton's upper grades with those of Russell, while the 8<sup>th</sup> grade from Russell combined with the 8<sup>th</sup> graders from South Fulton at that location.

## Status of Integration

Integration came later to Fulton County than other parts of the country, for the issue was decided in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* as far back as 1954. Opposition to school integration occurred not only in Fulton County, but also in practically every county and jurisdiction in Georgia and the entire South as well. The first concerted effort at integration resulted in violence in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. Shortly afterwards, massive protests and uprising occurred throughout many areas in the South.

As a response to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Georgia State legislature passed a state law in the mid-1950s requiring the complete closure of local school systems facing mandatory desegregation. Gubernatorial candidate Ernest Vandiver, who

was elected Georgia's governor in November 1958, adopted a campaign slogan of "no, not one" (black student would integrate a Georgia school under a Vandiver administration). In the late 1960s, Gov. Lester Maddox advocated resistance to integration.

The Atlanta Public Schools (APS) were the first to integrate in the Atlanta area when 9 African-American students were peacefully admitted to four all-white high schools on August 30, 1961. The APS sought to achieve integration through the adoption of "Freedom of Choice," leaving choice of schools to the parents and students. By April 1965, the District Court of Atlanta deemed such a plan had not sufficiently integrated the school system and that more aggressive methods were needed. Over the next few years the APS experimented with a number of remedies, including school re-zoning, teacher reassignments, limited busing, and the 1972-73 majority-to-minority program, to name a few.

#### Fulton County Board of Education

Fulton County's first official attempt at desegregation was outlined in a February 22, 1965 School Board plan based on a graduated concept whereby certain grades would be integrated with full integration achieved over time.<sup>1</sup> The proposal was as follows:

<u>School Year</u>	<u>Grades</u>
1965-66	1, 12
1966-67	1, 2, 11, 12
1967-68	1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 12
1968-69	1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12
1969-70	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
1970-71	all grades

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<sup>1</sup> C. N. Martin, ed., "County School Desegregation Plan Announced; Effective in '65," *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, 24 March 1965, 1.

The School Board plan was amended on May 13, 1965 as follows:<sup>2</sup>

<u>School Year</u>	<u>Grades</u>
1965-66	1, 2, 8, 12
1966-67	1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12
1967-68	all grades

This proposal, which was initially approved by Francis Keppel, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, contained a “Freedom of Choice” provision that allowed students to remain at their old school, with transportation provided, if they so desired. In the spring of 1966, the Commissioner of Education rejected the plan, stating it insufficient due to the relatively low numbers of affected students. Commissioner Keppel remanded the plan back to the Fulton County School Board for different and faster action. The Board stood fast to the “Freedom of Choice” plan and objected to the edict, resisting any effort to change the pace or method from the previously approved plan.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of “Choice” did little to change the racial makeup at Russell High. Louise McDaniel, Russell librarian from 1948-1979, wrote a manuscript in 1967 entitled *History of Russell High School*. In it, she wrote about the first attempt at integration at Russell in the fall of 1966 and mentioned that African-American students were offered the choice of attending Russell on a limited basis. That year, two African-American teachers were on the faculty, and only 9 African-American students, mostly in the lowered grades, opted to attend Russell. During the 1969-70 school year, the year prior to

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<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Fulton County Board of Education Plan for School Desegregation, *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, 2 June 1965, 1/8.

<sup>3</sup> C. N. Martin, ed., “Fulton County Board of Education Questions Integration Speed-up,” *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, 23 March 1966, 3A.

consolidation, the African-American presence at Russell was still low and included a total of only four teachers and thirteen students.

During this late 1960s time period, however, the U.S. Office of Education concentrated specifically on the situation concerning all-African-American Eva Thomas High in College Park and predominantly white College Park High School. By the spring of 1969, that office mandated one of three acceptable plans: 1) “Pair” both schools with certain grade levels at each school; 2) Close Eva Thomas High outright and combine all students at College Park High; or 3) Drastically alter attendance zones. The Fulton County School Board and Superintendent Paul West, along with local U.S. Congressman Fletcher Thompson, strongly opposed all three alternatives and continued to opt for the “Freedom of Choice” then currently in operation.<sup>4</sup> Faced with legal sanctions from the federal government, the Fulton County Board of Education finally relented and decided on option #2, the closing of 6-year-old Eva Thomas, the newest high school in all of Fulton County, and assigned the Eva Thomas students to College Park High, Lakeshore High, and Hapeville High.<sup>5</sup> Major protests from the Eva Thomas community eventually led to a one-year postponement of the closure of Eva Thomas; however, by April 1970 U.S. District Judge Albert J. Henderson issued a ruling that involved a comprehensive integration of all Fulton County schools for the fall of 1970. While “pairing” was not favored by the School Board the previous year, several such “pairing” plans were ultimately undertaken, including the one for South Fulton and Russell. The 1970-71

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<sup>4</sup> C. N. Martin, ed., “Fulton County Must Make-up for Past Discrimination,” *Atlanta’s Suburban Reporter*, 25 June 1969, 7.

<sup>5</sup> C. N. Martin, ed., “Fulton School Board Adopts Plan to Close Eva Thomas High,” *Atlanta’s Suburban Reporter*, 30 July 1969, 1.

school year began with African-American and white students at the Russell facility, while the combined 8<sup>th</sup> graders attended school at the South Fulton building.

### African-American Education in East Point

For African-American students in East Point, the consolidation of South Fulton and Russell was the end of an extended journey for educational equality that began shortly after the Civil War. Both prior to and during the early parts of the 1900s, the only avenue for any kind of formal education occurred in churches, such as the Union Baptist Church. By 1916, a school was built on Randall Street and eventually about 225 students attended the school. The facility was destroyed by fire in 1926 and a new school was built on Bayard Street in 1928. This building also burned in 1940. The school was rebuilt at 605 South Bayard Street and renamed the East Point Colored School.

This facility only served the needs of African-American students in grades 1-8. Since Fulton County did not have any African-American high schools at this time, African-American students wishing to pursue additional education beyond 8<sup>th</sup> grade attended Booker T. Washington High School in the APS district. Fulton County paid the cross-boundary tuition; however, the students were required to provide their own transportation, a difficult feat considering the distance involved and the necessary walking and trolley transfers to and from Booker T. Washington. A high school experience for East Point African-American students did not occur until 1947, when the East Point Colored School added a ninth grade and one grade level each year thereafter until a full senior high was in place by 1950.

### Russell/South Fulton Consolidation Aftermath

The 2000 movie, “Remember the Titans” starring Denzel Washington was reminiscent of the Russell-South Fulton consolidation. The movie storyline follows the 1971 pairing of an all-African-American school with an all-white school in Virginia, showing the resulting problems the football team and the community encountered. This Hollywood version of events included a number of violent incidents during the initial days of the school’s integration, but the actions and success of the football team eventually brought both the white and African-American communities together.

The Russell-South Fulton consolidation occurred during this author’s senior year. Integration appeared to go smoothly and all seemed well from this author’s white point of view; however, such may not have been the case from the African-American students’ perspective. Former South Fulton students left a school that was historically, socially, and culturally an important source of African-American identity. Also, when arriving at Russell, the former South Fulton African-American students did not see their former school officials in positions of authority, but rather saw white holdovers in important positions such as principal, head counselor, head football coach, male and female basketball coaches, and band director. The total Russell faculty only included six African-American teachers. In addition, large and highly visible student positions, such as Varsity and B-team cheerleaders, the Russellettes dance team, class officers, and the Majorette Corps, were all white.

Recent attempts to obtain newspaper accounts and reviews concerning the first year of the Russell-South Fulton merger were unsuccessful. Newspapers such as the

*Atlanta Constitution*, *Atlanta Journal*, *Atlanta's Suburban Reporter*, and the *Southside Sun* apparently had nothing sensational to cover on the subject. The author's informal conversations with fellow classmates turned up no instances of major problems related to the consolidation. A recent brief discussion with Bob Murray, a then-young coach and English teacher at Russell in 1970, revealed no problems that he could remember from a faculty member's perspective. The author recalls an incident when African-American students staged a walk out of a pep rally when *Dixie* was played; but, other than this action, no other major problems were observed nor reported.

A school accreditation committee visited Russell High during the second year of integration. In an official memo written by Evaluation Chairman M. O. Phelps, the opening sentence of his first paragraph stated: "Student and faculty morale appeared to be unusually high for a school which had been integrated to the extent that Russell High School has in the recent past."<sup>6</sup> A memorandum dated March 16, 1972 from Evaluation Committee member Wiley S. Bolden stated in part: "The degree of (outstanding) progress seems especially noteworthy when consideration is given to the fact that much of the attention and effort of the faculty have necessarily been diverted to making changes and adjustments occasioned by the desegregation of the Fulton County school system."<sup>7</sup>

G. L. Carroll of Southern Technical Institute in Marietta, Georgia, led a sub-committee of the evaluation group, the Steering Committee of Philosophy of

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<sup>6</sup> M. O. Phelps, Observations Concerning the Interim Evaluation for Russell High School, 14 March 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Wiley S. Bolden, Interim Evaluation Russell High School, memo to Dr. M. O. Phelps, 16 March 1972.

Objectives and School/Community. His memorandum time stamped March 17, 1972 included ten Russell High accomplishments, the first of which read: “Black and white students have integrated without major difficulty.”<sup>8</sup>

Further research and additional interviews may reveal different conclusions; however, the Russell-South Fulton consolidation was arguably successful for all involved.

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<sup>8</sup> G. L. Carroll, Meeting of Group I, report of the Steering Committee, Philosophy of Objectives and School & Community, 14 March 1972.