

While the Freedmen's Bureau was established by a bill passed on March 3, 1865, the bill unfortunately made no provisions for education. This oversight was rectified by directing proceeds made from abandoned or confiscated land to an education fund. While the Bureau provided support by means of transportation and provision of supplies, teachers, and buildings, funding mostly came from philanthropic and benevolent associations. In 1866, Congress extended the bill and included upwards of \$500,000 for education.

But the philanthropic endeavors of white Northerners were not without controversy and misfortunes. White teachers often could not find room or board and sometimes resorted to boarding with freedmen, which did not go unnoticed. Many Northerners were forced out of the state by threats or violence. Schools and churches for former slaves were frequently burned. Teachers in Stevenson, Jackson County, Alabama had to request military intervention to keep themselves and freedmen safe. The opposition of teaching freedmen took a turn in 1866, when plantation owners increasingly provided education for their former slaves. This apparent change of heart was mostly due to their opposition to Northern interference and as a way to control the freedmen and what they learned.

While there appeared to be some progress in the availability of education for African Americans in the South during Reconstruction, by the 20th century education was not a priority to the politicians of Alabama. Funding for education during Reconstruction was allotted on a per student basis, resulting in fairly proportionate funding for both white schools and African American schools. By the late 19th century, the power to distribute funds was given to each county and many school systems chronically underfunded schools for African American children. With a lack of funds and little to no means of local funding through taxes, the inequalities grew to the stereotypical concept of Southern inequality we think of today.

The 1901 rewriting of the state constitution had further negative impacts on public education by mandating segregation, disproportionately underfunding schools for African Americans, and removing power from

local and county school systems and placing it in the hand of the state legislature. From then on, if local or county school systems wished to modify tax laws for any reason, including to provide adequate funding for schools, the propositions would be subject to a statewide vote. Hurdles like these ensured that inequalities would not be addressed. Alabama and its educational system would continue to suffer from underfunding, racism, and inadequately short school terms.

In the early 20th century, the average school term for a white student was 72 days. Most schools for children of color were able to function an average of only 34 days per year. The average salary for a white teacher in Alabama was \$860 for a male and \$420 for a female. In contrast, the average African American male teacher made \$480 and a female teacher made \$140. The discrepancies also applied to the buildings in which the classes gathered. The average school for white children cost \$40,000, while the cost of schools for African American children averaged only \$1,000 – if they had their own schoolhouse at all. All of these numbers were even lower in rural communities.

Some efforts were made to correct these lapses in funding and equality by the "Education Governor," Braxton Bragg Comer, who was in office from 1907 to 1911. Under his guidance, it was mandated that every county have a high school. This more or less succeeded so that by 1918, only 10 of the 67 counties still lacked a high school. Comer also attempted to extend compulsory attendance to the age of sixteen. However, this did little to ensure that children regularly attended school or that schools could function for more than a few months of the year. A decade after the policy was introduced, attendance was only up one percent and only one in 11 rural school children made it to high school.

Comer also did little to quash the inequality holding back African American schools in Alabama. In 1912, Wilcox County is recorded as spending \$17 on each white student while only spending \$0.37 on each student of color in the county. Most of this money would go toward hiring a teacher and paying for a few school books. These minimum provisions meant that African American students were left to find the time and place to meet, usually homes and churches, whenever they

could afford to gather. And the illiteracy rate for children of color over the age of 10 was 31.3% by 1920.

It took several more years for another set of reforms to be proposed. In 1927, the state education reform package appropriated the largest amount of state funds to education to date. The reform extended the mandatory school term to seven months for all schools, created the Division of Negro Education, which included two state-level African American employees, raised the average pay for teachers, and established Opportunity Schools in every county expected to enroll a minimum of 15 students. The funding for this reform package resembled modern-day sources, including taxation on roads, certain businesses, tonnage from mining, and the sale of tobacco.

However, the narrative of education and equality in Alabama is one of ebb and flow. Despite these advances in funds and mandates on opening schools and lengthening the terms, the policy's effects failed to reach everywhere they were needed. Rural schools were still not able to keep their doors open for more than an average of 123 days. Often the rural-urban divide was worse than the racial divide when it came to inequality in schools and sometimes these inequalities were compounded. Economic discrepancies meant that 84% of landowners' children were able to attend school, while only 58% of sharecroppers' children could attend. With a very small percentage of African American families able to afford a home or farm, the likelihood of their children attending school was lower than average.

The Great Depression wiped out nearly all the progress of educational funding and equality gained in Alabama. Resources were so scarce during the Depression that only 16 of 116 school systems were able to pay their teachers in full in 1932. Some local and county systems resorted to paying their teachers in vouchers that could be redeemed at local businesses having special agreements with the school system.

In 1932 and 1933, more than 227,000 school children received a maximum of five months of schooling. This would have been less in rural areas and many schools for African American children were forced to