The University of Chicago

Chicago Schooling, Benjamin Willis, and the Fight Against Integration

By

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Introduction

On February 25, 1964, Chicago school children abandoned their classrooms. Joining their parents in the streets, thousands of young Black Chicagoans protested the conditions of their schools. By the following day, Mayor Richard J. Daley publicly denounced the protestors. He commended those White parents who chose to remove their children from the protests and advocated for the arrest of the "Negro" parents who brought their children into the fold.[1] This boycott culminated a near decade long conflict between Chicago's Black community and Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Underfunded classrooms overflowed with students, money flowed out of their districts, and administrators failed to address the concerns of parents. Representation held a significant place in the program of the protestors. CPS employed few Black administrators and created an environment not conducive to school improvement.

Protestors rallied against the figurehead of school segregation in Chicago, Benjamin Willis. Willis, the Superintendent of CPS since 1953, repeatedly fought against integration. Originally heralded as an administrator of a new epoch of schooling, Willis slowly lost the favor of parents and teachers. The new structures and investments into communities he promised never arrived, and the problems laid on his desk metastasized into national conflicts. His tactics placed him at the heart of all the criticisms of public schools in the region, and the protestors called first for his resignation.[2] The protestors achieved this goal within the next year, but the larger dream of equality in education disappeared from the conversation. Over two decades

[1] Ted Coleman, "Daley Threatens Negro Parents, Backs Bigots" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973),* Feb 26, 1964. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.
[2] Peggy Robinson, "Benjamin Willis: Symbol of Segregation: School Chief Key Target of Rights Groups" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973),* Feb 18, 1964. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

later, Chicago Public Schools faced a revitalized investigation into its racial divide. The federal government once again found that the segregation problem never resolved, and the schools needed renewed integration efforts.[3] To this day, Chicago schools remain heavily segregated, with nearly 70% of Black students attending "heavily segregated schools." This label defines heavily segregated as 90% racially homogenous, and this figure from 2012 is a reduction from 75% in 1989 and 82% in 1980.

Following the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education,* public school systems across the country fell into the battleground of integration. Chicago stood poised as a massive northern city with a large Black community that grew through the first half of the 20th century. With the Great Migration following Emancipation and Reconstruction, Black communities in Chicago exploded. As this flood of Southern Blacks settled in the Northern metropolis, White people fled the city for the growing suburban communities of the 20th Century.[4] The city remained massively segregated, and nearly all public schools faced a racial homogeneity problem. Government mandate never created the crisis facing CPS, but the legislative basis for the system led to massive inequalities in education. School funding based on property values and local taxation created large inequalities in funding, where Black

[3] South Side Weekly Madeleine Parrish and Chima Ikoro, "Chicago Public Schools and Segregation: FIRSTHAND: Segregation," WTTW Chicago, February 23, 2022, https://interactive.wttw.com/firsthand/segregation/chicago-public-schools-and-segregation#:~:text=Under%20these%20policies%2C%20schools%20remained,still%20in%20extremely%20segregated%20schools.

[4] James Grossman, "The Great Migration," Great migration, accessed July 26, 2022, http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html#:~:text=The%20Great%20Migration%2C%20a%20long,the%20South%20during%20these%20decades.
Nicholas Lemann,*The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1991.

students received far less than their White counterparts. Over his decade long reign as Superintendent, Willis not only failed to address the funding issue, but doubled down by fighting integration initiatives. The actions of this man and his administration reflect the entrenched power of White Supremacy in government. With the support of political machine Mayor Daley, Willis successfully pushed back all attempts to integrate his schools. The story of segregation in Chicago flows through its school system, and that school system remains segregated to this day due to the efforts of Benjamin Willis.

The historical scholarship surrounding this epoch of Chicago history remain remarkably thin. With the plight of activists in the Willis era largely failing, much of the activity and administrative changes in this period fall behind blanket issues of White flight and national political conflict. Beneath these larger activities, the history of Chicago education immediately following *Brown v. Board* offers keen insight into the machinations of Supreme Court rulings meeting local governments. Opposition to integration fills numerous texts of Southern history, but the conflicts in Northern cities like Chicago need retelling. With integration of schooling mandated by the federal government, the public school system of Chicago faced the need for massive structural change. What instead happened was a decade long conflict between the Black community of Chicago and an intransigent administration figure headed by Benjamin Willis. Following his tenure, Chicago remained almost entirely segregated in schooling, with no more government interference for another twenty years. This narrative allows for further exploration into the complex racial histories of the Northern cities, which often face little investigation in comparison to the intense litany of works on the American South. This piece of American history reveals a complex racial conflict where incremental improvements and small

concessions from an administration allowed the government of Chicago to fail its largest racial minority for decades without recompense. Most of the stories from this conflict easily coalesce with the larger national spectacle of integration, but due to the success of figures like Willis, the historians' investigative hooks rarely sink into the massive conflict over classroom integration.

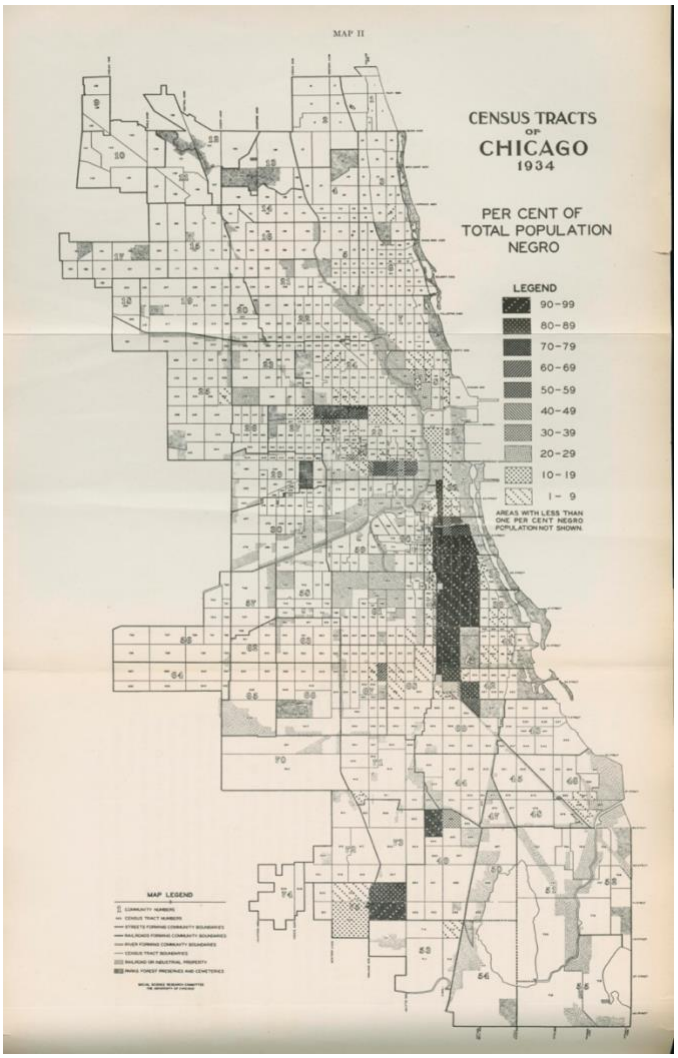
Early 20th Century Chicago and the "Great Migration"

Jim Crow legislation dramatically molded the living environment of millions of Americans, both Black and White. Violence and discrimination permeated the daily lives of citizens everywhere, driving many away from their homes. This led to the "Great Migration", which American Journalist Isabel Wilkerson describes as a "defection".[5] The term migration fails to integrate the reality of the situation. Black Southerners fled the intense persecution and violence characteristic of the South in the era of Jim Crow. For nearly 50 years, millions of Black people moved North as refugees from the violence of their homeland. These individuals flocked to northern and western cities such as Chicago to find a safer life in a more accepting society.

Chicago offered fantastic opportunities for Black southerners. The large city hosted a robust meatpacking industry, as well as numerous other enterprises with a need for cheap labor. Before World War One, positions in these industries rarely employed Black people, as racial discrimination motivated businesses to favor European migrants. As the 20th century progressed, and wars limited European immigration, Black men received more opportunities in the industrial centers of the city. For women, domestic work in the city offered better

[5] NPR.org, *NPR.org* (NPR, April 30, 2021), https://www.npr.org/transcripts/992040563.

conditions and wages than similar employment in the South.[6] These opportunities drove a dramatic change in the demographics of the city over the century.



In 1916, Black people comprised roughly two percent of the total population, a miniscule minority group. By 1970, nearly 500,000 Black people settled within the city limits, raising their share of the population to nearly thirty-three percent.[7] By the mid-Century, the Black population of Chicago consolidated into an interconnected community. The political and economic power of this group evolved into a major consideration for the city and state government. The heart of this new community lived on Chicago's "South Side," mostly in a small region dubbed the "Black Belt."[8]

[6] James Grossman, "The Great Migration," Great migration, accessed July 26, 2022, http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html#:~:text=The%20Great%20Migration%2C%20a%20long,the%20South%20during%20these%20decades.

[7] James Grossman, "The Great Migration," Great migration, accessed July 26, 2022, http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html#:~:text=The%20Great%20Migration%2C%20a%20long,the%20South%20during%20these%20decades.

[8] University of Chicago. Social Science Research Committee. *Census Tracts of Chicago, 1934*. [Chicago]: Social Science Research Committee, University of Chicago, 1934.

This strip of land began at 12th Street and stretched south to 79th Street between Wentworth and Cottage Grove avenues. This region also hosted numerous riots from poor Whites who lacked the resources to leave this neighborhood but disliked the demographic change of the community.[9]

The University of Chicago holds an important historical role in this region. The University was founded decades before the Great Migration and chose a small area of the South Side to place its campus. As the population shifted, and more of the surrounding area filled with Black defectors, the University remained a symbol of White Chicago. This stands clear looking at the maps of demographic parcels of the area, where the University demarcates White Chicago from Black.

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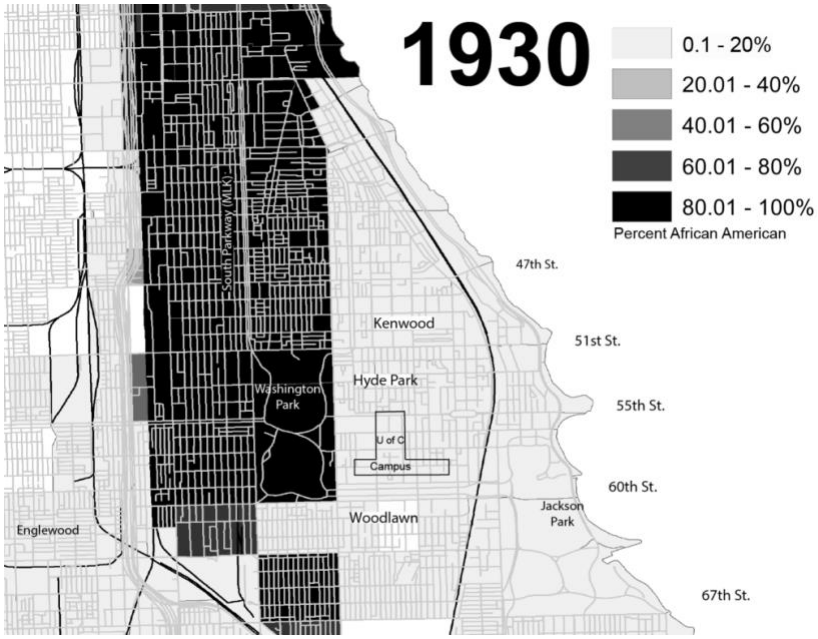
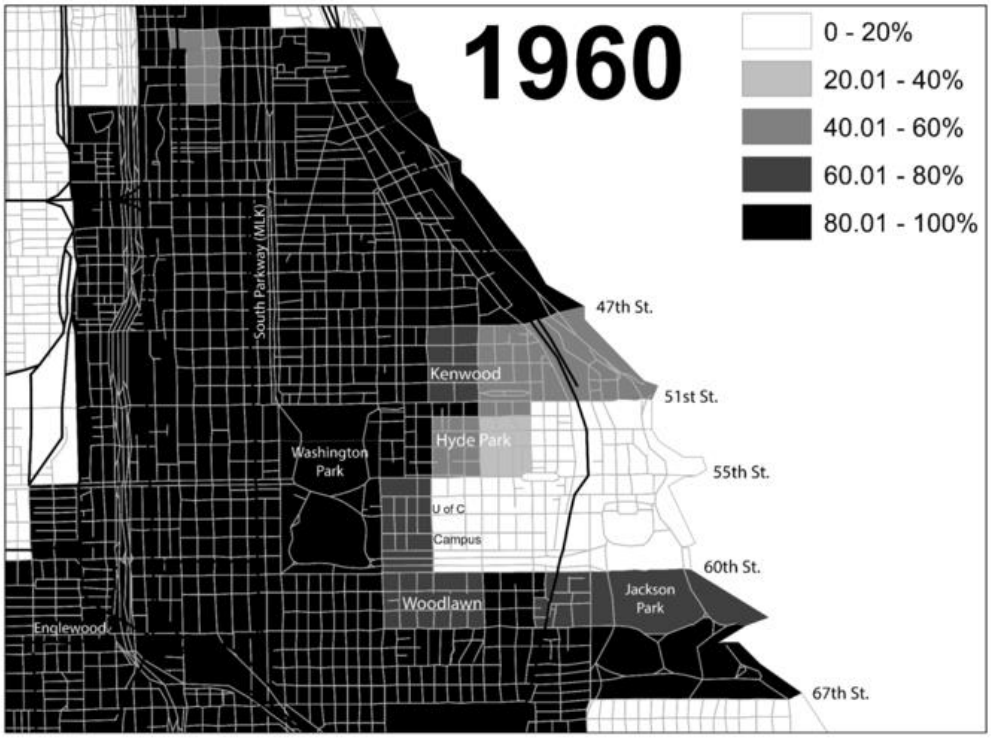


[9] James Grossman, "The Great Migration," Great migration, accessed July 26, 2022, http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html#:~:text=The%20Great%20Migration%2C%20a%20long,the%20South%20during%20these%20decades.

[10] Alma Campos and Chima Ikoro, "The Structures That Divide Us," South Side Weekly, March 4, 2022, https://southsideweekly.com/the-structures-that-divide-us/.



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The rapid growth of suburban America coincided with this period of Black defection. White Americans left their city dwellings for newer, larger homes with open space outside of the city. Whether motivated by the popularity of suburban spaciousness or by the fear of a new urban Black community, many Chicagoans fled to the North and West of the city. These areas remain to this day predominantly White, and the racial divide lies along the South versus North axis.[12] The construction of a new highway system to support the suburban neighborhoods also

[11] Alma Campos and Chima Ikoro, "The Structures That Divide Us," South Side Weekly, March 4, 2022, https://southsideweekly.com/the-structures-that-divide-us/.

[12] John L. Rury, "Race, Space, and the Politics of Chicago's Public Schools: Benjamin Willis and the Tragedy of Urban Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1999): 117–42, https://doi.org/10.2307/370035.
Alan B. Anderson, and George W. Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986.

furthered this racial divide. Regions of the city populated by Black residents became sites for the new Dan Ryan expressway in 1961, and the massive economic burden of that project fell upon Black Chicago.[13] In this way, the development of Chicago into a national metropolis relied on consistently pushing Black people into more enclosed areas of the city.

Benjamin Willis

The dramatic demographic changes sweeping the city created a harshly unequal environment. Black regions of the city faced poverty conditions and lack of government support. In no place was this reality clearer than the classroom. Poor funding not only meant losing access to educational tools, but also drove potential teachers away. Schools needed more teachers, but inadequate pay scared many teachers away. Beyond issues of money, schools faced a crisis of purpose in this period. New curriculum and teaching methods popped up across the country to provide better outcomes for students. Stakeholders in education wanted classes tailored to desired outcomes, education that created a better workforce.[14] Preparation for college rose as a key need for high school students in this era, and the tools of the administration needed updating to address this concern. Across the city concerns over student behavior plagued administrators.

[13] Alma Campos and Chima Ikoro, "The Structures That Divide Us," South Side Weekly, March 4, 2022, https://southsideweekly.com/the-structures-that-divide-us/.
[14] John L. Rury, "Race, Space, and the Politics of Chicago's Public Schools: Benjamin Willis and the Tragedy of Urban Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1999): 117–42, https://doi.org/10.2307/370035.

For the growing Black population on the South Side, teachers faced racial questions. A large number of teachers in this time were women, and Black women also played a major role in the freedom movements of the 20th century. Looking to the problems facing the Black community, several Black teachers organized their community around a new private school that allowed students to learn in an environment without the stressors of scarcity and lack of funding.[15] Many successful Black teachers found their only avenue to better wages placed them in all White classrooms. These educators routinely fought for better opportunities but rejected the choice to teach only White students.[16] Many newly chartered private schools boasted programs that addressed "the severe problems of discipline and parent unconcern," and the horror of public schools with classrooms of 40 desks with 50 students.[17] Howalton School, a Black private school in this region spread pamphlets around the area raving about their successful program. The choices made by the three women leading this school reflect the needs of their community. June Howe, Charlotte Stratton, and Doris Allen built a small private school that served its community and was the only "Black-owned and operated school in Chicago."[18] One of the overlooked issues in public schools that Howalton addressed was the need for

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[15] Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, 82.

[16] John L. Rury, "Race, Space, and the Politics of Chicago's Public Schools: Benjamin Willis and the Tragedy of Urban Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1999): 117–42, https://doi.org/10.2307/370035.June Howe, Charlotte Stratton, Doris Allen.Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection. Howalton School Archive, Woodson Regional Library. Folder 1-1 and 1-2.

[17] June Howe, Charlotte Stratton, Doris Allen.Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection. Howalton School Archive, Woodson Regional Library. Folder 1-8.

[18] Howalton School Archive Folder 1-8.

adequate meals for students, and this school repeatedly exposited on their wonderful dietitian who made hot meals for the children every day.[19] A resident of the community, Mildred D. Johnson, who taught at Howalton for nearly two decades described the school as "an Oasis in an educational desert."[20]

Benjamin Willis entered this quagmire as a revolutionary administrator with the knowledge to revitalize Chicago Public Schools. While his tenure in the city ended with violence, anger, and resignation, his early work as Superintendent brought excitement and hope to the Chicago community.[21] Many individuals commented on his distinctive personability after meeting with him. Willis remained comfortable in a variety of social venues, including pushing in on high-brow business officials to push for school improvement policies.[22] His charming personality starkly contrasts the rancor of his downfall. Willis, a native of Baltimore, offered a worthy candidate to solve the woes of CPS. He attended George Washington University for undergraduate study, the University of Maryland for his master's degree, and Columbia for his Doctorate in education. By the early 20's, Willis stood ready for a rich career in the field of education. He began as a smalltown teacher in Maryland and steadily worked his way up the

[19] Howalton School Archive Folder 1-2.
[20] Howalton School Archive Folder 1-9.
[21] Fulton, William. "BUFFALO HATES LOSING WILLIS TO CHICAGO JOB: SCHOOLS HEAD TO COME HERE SEPT. 2." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 21, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

Thomson, John R. "WILLIS OFFERED JOB AS CHICAGO SCHOOLS CHIEF: BUFFALO EDUCATOR WEIGHS DECISION WILLIS OFFERED JOB AS CHICAGO SCHOOLS CHIEF BUFFALO MAN ASKS TIME TO WEIGH DECISION." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 02, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

"SCHOOL BOARD UNANIMOUSLY ELECTS WILLIS: VOTES 4 YEAR CONTRACT AS SUPERINTENDENT." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 11, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[22]"Obituaries (4): Benjamin C. Willis, Ex-City Schools Chief." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Aug 30, 1988. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

school system until he served as principal of four separate schools from 1923-1934. After a decade of work, Willis finally accepted a job as the Superintendent of Caroline County Maryland schools. His future in this role brought him across the country to New York City, Buffalo, and finally Chicago. The pedigree Willis possessed placed him in a high echelon of school administrators. He received praise across the country for his new tactics in promoting educational endeavors to the public, many lauding him as the "salesman of education."[23] Upon his departure from Maryland public schools, his fellow administrators spoke glowingly of his profound efforts to improve the state's education, further stating that the public school system Willis created was "fit for a new world."[24] Willis pushed for new guidelines of education that promoted student success after school and creating vocational programs to prepare pupils for the jobs available in their time.[25] When hired for the role of Superintendent of CPS, Willis became the highest paid educator in the nation. The President of the United States held the only position with higher pay for a public official.[26] The decision by the Board of Education to hire a new Superintendent from outside of the administration reflected an intense divide between the board and the larger education community. Board members cited a lack of

[23] Thomson, John R. "WILLIS OFFERED JOB AS CHICAGO SCHOOLS CHIEF: BUFFALO EDUCATOR WEIGHS DECISION WILLIS OFFERED JOB AS CHICAGO SCHOOLS CHIEF BUFFALO MAN ASKS TIME TO WEIGH DECISION." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 02, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[24] "Benjamin Willis Honored at Farewell Dinner Here," *Morning Herald*, May 1st, 1942. https://access-newspaperarchive-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/us/maryland/hagerstown/morning-herald/1947/04-11/page-8 (June 14, 2022).

[25] Fulton, William. "BUFFALO HATES LOSING WILLIS TO CHICAGO JOB: SCHOOLS HEAD TO COME HERE SEPT. 2." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 21, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[26] Rury, John L. "Race, Space, and the Politics of Chicago's Public Schools: Benjamin Willis and the Tragedy of Urban Education." *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1999): 117–42. https://doi.org/10.2307/370035.

qualification from within the administration and heavily criticized the organization for a lack of candidates with the capacity to fulfill the requirements of the job.[27] This conflict and divide between the highest levels of administration and the teachers and administrators on the ground laid the framework for the transgressions cited by later protestors. The Board continuously failed to address the needs of the communities they represented and elected Benjamin Willis as the leader who would become the face of that conflict.

Early in his tenure, Willis received heavy praise from the public. The issue of overcrowding faced him immediately, and he reacted with a program to build more schools. The speed and efficiency earned him both local and national attention, as well as the nickname "Ben the Builder."[28] This early program paired well with the core focus of Willis' early years, investment into children. For Willis, investment into programs that supported child development solved many of the issues facing public schools. Children misbehaved and succeeded less due to lack of resources and enriching programs.[29] Using the rhetoric of investing in the youth, Willis won over a considerable number of parents and government officials. During this early era of success, his policies brought him broad support from the public, but as the decade continued, the issues of Chicago schooling continued to build. Newly

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[27] "SCHOOL BOARD UNANIMOUSLY ELECTS WILLIS: VOTES 4 YEAR CONTRACT AS SUPERINTENDENT." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 11, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[28] "BIG BEN THE BUILDER." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Dec 02, 1966. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[29] Howalton School Archive Folder 2-7.
Kerr, James. "Ben Willis After Chicago: He's in Florida Now, and His Troubles Aren't Over... Whatever Happened to Benjamin Willis?" *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Oct 31, 1971. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

built schools routinely failed to support the rapidly growing student population, and improper investment plans created harsh inequalities in racially segregated schools.

Chicago during the 1950s faced a huge population loss as massive numbers of White families fled to the suburbs. However, during that time, the number of students enrolling in schools increased dramatically. 120,000 new students entered the school system, mostly from families immigrating from the South. Willis pointed to this increase as an incredible tax on the school system, and advocates for his administration's ability to work through this challenge. By the end of his tenure, Willis boasted that nearly 40 percent of Chicago students attended classrooms in buildings less than ten years old.[30] Willis' school building program highlighted his best qualities as a school administrator. In a city rapidly losing space and expanding outward, Willis worked tirelessly to find opportunities for new schools to resolve the issue of overcrowding.

During these years as an administrator, Willis developed his own policy ideas for the management of large public-school systems. He advocated for the "community school" program in which investment into schools began with the families who attended. This placed more control over curriculum and school administration in the hands of local governments, while also creating opportunities for parents to work with schools on curriculum.[31] This system

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[30] Kerr, James. "Ben Willis After Chicago: He's in Florida Now, and His Troubles Aren't Over... Whatever Happened to Benjamin Willis?" *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Oct 31, 1971. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

James Grossman, "The Great Migration," Great migration, accessed July 26, 2022, http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html#:~:text=The%20Great%20Migration%2C%20a%20long,the%20South%20during%20these%20decades.

[31] Fulton, William. "BUFFALO HATES LOSING WILLIS TO CHICAGO JOB: SCHOOLS HEAD TO COME HERE SEPT. 2." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 21, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

allowed for many of the recurring issues facing Chicago's many schools to avoid the desk of high-level administrators. The underlying idea of this system was the acceptance that parents and stakeholders directly involved in the schools possessed the knowledge of how to solve problems.

This program arrived with considerable excitement from the community. One major facet of this implementation was the promotion of parent teacher organizations to streamline parental involvement in education. One of the proudest points that Willis espoused in his success in his previous role in Buffalo was the robust growth of nearly 47 PTA groups in the city of 600,000.[32] Willis claimed that these groups showed parents what was truly going on in the classrooms and therefore created a community more closely intertwined with their children's education.

The preliminary basis of this program possesses substantial potential benefits. Investing in community support offers opportunities for more student engagement, potentially fighting issues of student apathy. However, the issues of community schooling arose as the 50's ended. With a large portion of school funding coming from property taxes, schools in wealthier neighborhoods, typically White and Northern, received adequate or even excessive funding. South Side Black schools, which already faced massive student to teacher ratios suffered with minute incomes in comparison. Additionally, community school systems possessed few tools to address the problems of racially divided cities. The fiercest protectors of this system often pushed vociferously for the maintenance of segregated schooling. One community

[32] Fulton, William. "BUFFALO HATES LOSING WILLIS TO CHICAGO JOB: SCHOOLS HEAD TO COME HERE SEPT. 2." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963),* Jun 21, 1953. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

organization, the Mothers Opposed to Meddling in Schools, frequently supported Willis' community schools' program. This group was described in the Chicago Tribune as definitively opposed to integration.[33] Dr. Phillip Hauser, an activist and educator prolific in the Chicago education community, continuously opposed Willis' neighborhood school programs. This fight constituted a key battleground in the fight for integration in the minds of Black educators. Hauser also worked alongside Timuel Black, a revolutionary figure in the Chicago community whose work in later decades left a prolific mark on the city of Chicago's educational system.[34] These educators frequently came to oppose not only Willis' administration, but also the Illinois state legislature. In their words, "But there is civil disobedience also to be found in the Illinois State Legislature, which has refused for decades to heed Chicago's needs, including her educational needs."[35] The structures of White Supremacy ran deeply through the state and municipal governments, but the figurehead of segregation in Chicago was Benjamin Willis.

[33] Moore, William. "INTEGRATION JOB TOUGH, WILLIS SAYS: TESTIFIES BEFORE SCHOOL PROBERS WILLIS DEFENDS CHICAGO SCHOOL SYSTEM AT HEARING." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Jul 28, 1965. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[34] Here I would like to acknowledge the tremendous works of Timuel Black, whose activism on behalf of the Black community of Chicago cannot be understated. Those that knew him loved him and were awestruck at the powerful voice and efforts of the unassuming man. Timuel died in 2021, and his massive archive of writings covers nearly five decades of work in fighting for the advancement of Black schooling in Chicago. Unfortunately, his work fell outside the scope of this research, but the magnitude of his efforts deserved address.

[35] Moore, William. "INTEGRATION JOB TOUGH, WILLIS SAYS: TESTIFIES BEFORE SCHOOL PROBERS WILLIS DEFENDS CHICAGO SCHOOL SYSTEM AT HEARING." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Jul 28, 1965. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

Willis Versus Bussing & Integration

By the beginning of the 1960's, Black schools remained overloaded. Classrooms burst at the seams, and teachers struggled to control their students. Black residents believed the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions granted them the standing to resolve these issues. For nearly 5 years the question of integration stood on the forefront of Chicago public affairs. Benjamin Willis' early success faced a true crisis, and the mantle of "Ben the Builder" tenuously remained. The late 50's and early 60's represents the major decisions of his administrative career, and his fight against integration stands as his legacy.

When the one hundred schools failed to generate enough space for the influx of Black students, administrators looked for new solutions. The next tragedy enforced on the Black student body was the double shift system. Rather than expanding funding or changing the systems of districting to more fairly account for the Black population, Willis expanded the existing shift system for Black students. The school day divided into two four-hour sections with separate student groups, one group attended a morning session and the other in the afternoon. The Chicago Defender, a staple newspaper of the Black activist community in Chicago, describes the system as giving, "the Negro child four hours in the class room with an ill equipped teacher while the White student is always given an eight hour day."[36] This transgression by the district played in stark contrast to the hopefulness of the community following *Brown v. Board*. The

[36] "Politicians using NAACP, Urban League to Fight Chicago's School Boycott: Leaders Reject Daley's Offer for Meeting." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973),* Feb 05, 1964. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

residents of the South Side cried out that the experience of Black students in Alabama, Mississippi, and Kansas that led to the landmark case continued to their Northern Classrooms.

Benjamin Willis continuously fought against integration measures in schooling, arguing that the demographic changes in the city school system resulted from forces outside the control of government. Many scholars focusing on the city saw the issue of segregation and sought to research solutions. The Chicago School Survey, a report of research from University of Chicago professor of education Robert J. Havighurst, looked to provide concrete solutions to this issue. Havighurst pioneered educational research for several decades, working in dozens of cities across the United States. He focused mainly on the educational needs of minority groups and gifted students. Throughout his research he often argues that the education of urban environments needs drastic change to improve the outcomes of students. Further, he frequently suggests means of investment to best target the common issues facing students. From the outset Havighurst suggests a wave of spending to provide educational resources to affected schools. Comparing data from testing in suburban schools, he outlines the steady decrease in job preparedness and IQ results from city students.[37] Further the report explicitly details the connection between the steady segregation of CPS, the reduction in funding, and the drop in student performance.

Many administrators presented Willis with smaller solutions that might appease both the Black community that opposed him and the White ones that supported him. One such suggestion allowed a small subset of Black students to transfer to underfilled White schools in

[37] Robert J. Havighurst "The Chicago School Survey" *The Phi Delta Kappan* 46, no. 4 (1964): 162–66. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20343293.

different sections of Chicago. This policy faced criticism from both communities, as White parents active in school communities largely opposed integration, and Black families disliked the idea of shipping their students to schools across the city.[38] Willis also opposed this suggestion heavily, to the point of a brief, three-week resignation in 1963. He touted the importance of maintaining schools as "colorblind" institutions, as a driving factor behind his opposition to the policy.[39] This system resurged in later decades with the magnet school system, which allowed excelling students to attend better-funded schools. Ironically, this proposed system found adoption in Willis' next Superintendent position in Broward County, Florida. His tenure their ended due to Black family's opposition to bussing.

The federal government inevitably stepped onto the scene to combat Willis' intransigence. A commission from the U.S Department of Health Education and Welfare arrived in Chicago with the intent of determining the scale of segregation and the necessity for federal intervention. After several weeks of research into the abysmal nature of the schools, the report pended release. Knowing the contents of this report could tremendously damage his career, Willis sought out a powerful friend. Mayor Richard Daley possessed incredible political power during Willis's tenure. On a national scale Daley held the respect of powerful political and economic elites through his machine politics. When Willis called on Daley for help with this

[38] Kerr, James. "Ben Willis After Chicago: He's in Florida Now, and His Troubles Aren't Over... Whatever Happened to Benjamin Willis?" *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Oct 31, 1971. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[39] Kerr, James. "Ben Willis After Chicago: He's in Florida Now, and His Troubles Aren't Over... Whatever Happened to Benjamin Willis?" *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Oct 31, 1971. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

report on his failings, Daley answered with his usual backroom politicking. He set a meeting with President Lyndon Johnson in a hotel in New York City. Few details of the meeting escaped the room, but the consequences reverberated throughout Chicagoland. The federal commission was disbanded, and the members removed from their duties.[40] Following this massive victory for Willis, no more questions regarding segregation ever received federal attention. This massive blow meant an end to much of the hopes of federally enforced integration, and the government would not return to the city schools for nearly two decades. During that time the conditions of the schools remained horrid.

During the brief period where Willis' administration came under federal scrutiny, the alluring character and personality of Willis arose. When he testified in front of the House Education and Labor committee, he found intense opposition from select members. Professor Phillip M. Hauser from the University of Chicago also spoke during this session and vigorously attacked Willis' character and policy. The vitriol Willis received resulted in many less entrenched members to advocate for calmer discussion to search for positive outcomes. Willis further responded to his attackers with words that reflect his calm and charming rhetoric, stating, "Our goal is to provide the best possible education – intellectually, socially, and emotionally – for every child White or Negro, so that each as an individual, may become, for

[40]Miscellaneous: Random Clippings. 1964. TS Box 1121, Folder 11, Item 517, Years of Expansion, 1950-1990: Series 3: Subject Files: Equality Before the Law, 1941-1987. Mudd Library, Princeton University. *The Making of Modern Law: American Civil Liberties Union Papers* (accessed July 27, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/NVNVHY536695901/ACLU?u=chic_rbw&sid=bookmark-ACLU&xid=7105a7d8&pg=4.

that of his benefit and that of his family and the nation, all that he is capable of being."[41] This statement, juxtaposed with the words of his many detractors, points to a core issue of Willis' policy. His words allude to a lack of conviction, where significant integration and racial progress meets the intransigence of continuity. These statements provided the backbone of many Black activists' complaints against school administration. While he publicly supported all students' rights to a valuable education, the system's causing the inequality received little change. This created Willis as a symbol of segregation and White Supremacy.

Willis Wagons

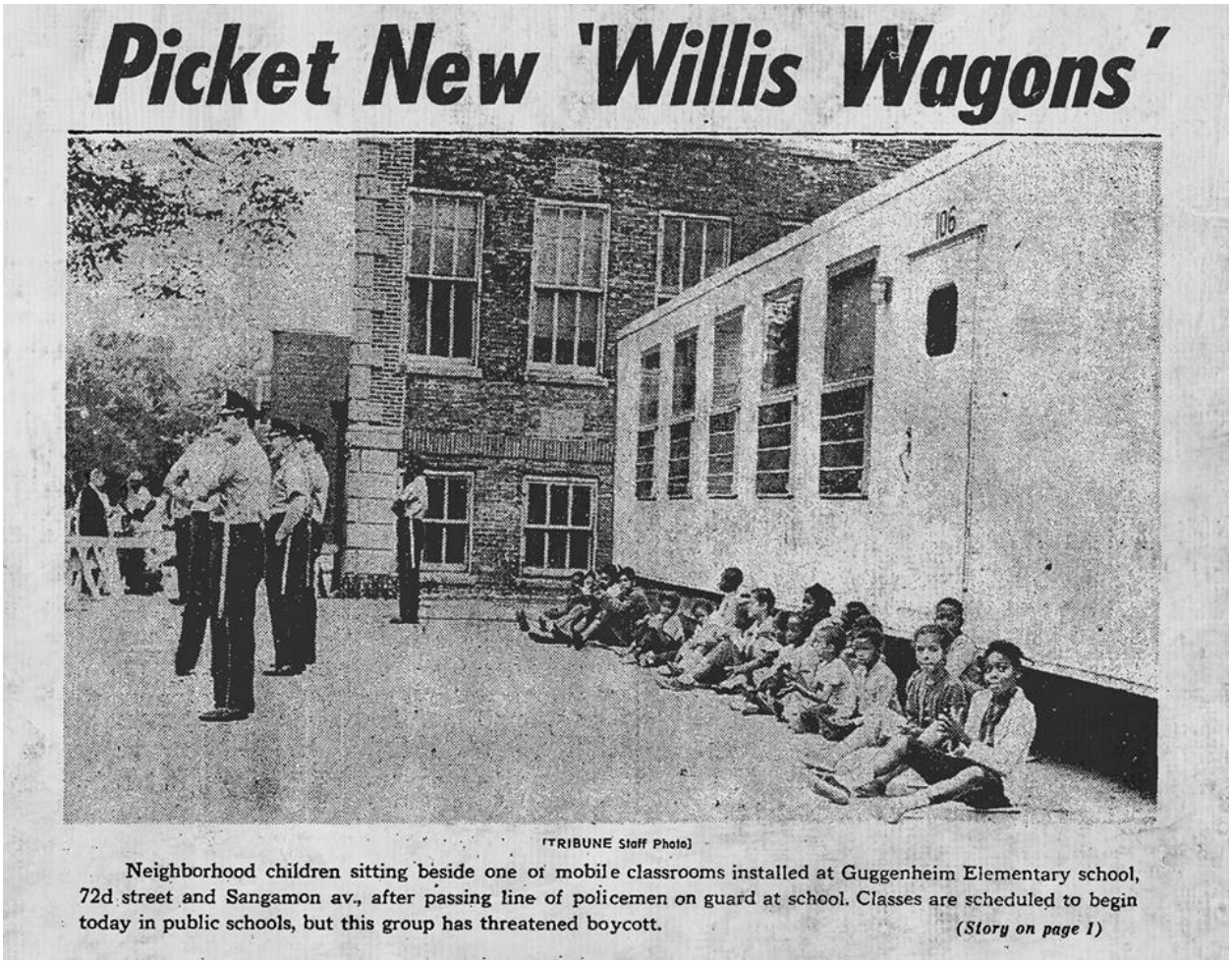
Through his entire tenure, Benjamin Willis fought to solve the issue of class size. Many classrooms in Black communities saw 40 or more students under the purview of a single teacher. Concurrently, classrooms in the White neighborhoods regularly stayed empty throughout the day, as the student numbers remained low.[42] Dr. Curtis Melnick, a local superintendent in Jackson Park, repeatedly fought with parents on this issue. Backed strongly by Benjamin Willis, Melnick pushed the narrative that no White schools possessed empty classrooms.[43] Despite the public claims that overcrowding was not an issue in schools, parents as well as researchers saw the issues on the ground level. Willis and other administrators spoke

[41] Moore, William. "INTEGRATION JOB TOUGH, WILLIS SAYS: TESTIFIES BEFORE SCHOOL PROBERS WILLIS DEFENDS CHICAGO SCHOOL SYSTEM AT HEARING." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Jul 28, 1965. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[42] Anne Getz, "Urges 3d School Plan in Hyde Park-Kenwood: Dr. Melnick Proposes use of Kozminski," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Dec 19, 1965. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[43] "Pupils to Group for Protection." *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Sep 25, 1966. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

to reporters about the falsity of these claims, while simultaneously attempting to design policy to address the issues.



Picket New 'Willis Wagons'

[TRIBUNE Staff Photo]

Neighborhood children sitting beside one of mobile classrooms installed at Guggenheim Elementary school, 72d street and Sangamon av., after passing line of policemen on guard at school. Classes are scheduled to begin today in public schools, but this group has threatened boycott. *(Story on page 1)*

The most controversial move of Willis' career occurred in 1962. The overwhelming response from Chicago's Black community eventually led to massive school boycotts and protests that remain major events in the history of the city. Benjamin Willis sought to address the overcrowding issue once again with alternative styles of schooling. Rather than providing funding to hire more teachers, or continuing his campaign of school building, Willis thought to provide a cheaper and flexible solution. He commissioned over 600 "mobile schooling units" to

offer additional spaces to problem schools.[44] Each unit provided a school with extra classroom space where overflow students could receive [45] their own desk. These units, little more than retrofitted aluminum trailers, seriously offended the communities in which they were sent.[46] From the moment these mobile classrooms rolled onto school grounds, parents and students protested in front of them. In many cases, the trailers crowded the schools even further by taking over any outdoor space.

Schools in the Chicago Public school system rarely possessed adequate outdoor space, and children enjoyed minimal activity spaces in which to play during recess. Most schools used a vacant concrete lot as a space for students to run and play ball during their free time. Many students remember back to their time with these trailers with feelings of indifference. The complexity of the overcrowding solution rarely made sense to elementary school students, and

[44] '63 Boycott and '63 Boycott, "'63 Boycott," '63 Boycott, March 26, 2014, Chicago Tribune Archive, http://63boycott.kartemquin.com/blog/boycotter-stories/a-history-of-willis-wagons/.
[45] Jeff Nichols, "The Untold School Segregation Story Behind Bernie Sanders's 1963 Arrest," Chicago Reader, August 18, 2021, https://chicagoreader.com/news-politics/the-untold-school-segregation-story-behind-bernie-sanderss-1963-arrest/.
[46] "Oct. 22, 1963: Chicago School Boycott," Zinn Education Project, October 23, 2021, https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/1963-chicago-school-boycott/.

they instead cared more about the space that was lost. A recurring issue in their memories was the placement of the new units. This lack of space meant that Willis' mobile units landed directly in the concrete lots once dedicated to children's playtime activity, and many former students recall their disillusionment with their recess struggles.[47] The offense at the shoddy nature of the mobile units mattered very little to students already accustomed to overflowing classrooms with outdated supplies.

Within several weeks of the initial release of the "Willis Wagons," parents began to speak out against the bizarre and insensitive attempt at overcrowding resolution. Community activists began with threats of school boycotts if the ramshackle metal cases remained in their children's school lots. The refrain from the community focused on the long history of war against Black advancement in education. Since many Black Chicagoans knew relatives or neighbors who migrated from the South in the early century, connections to Jim Crow regulations arose. The history of Chicago segregation revolved around this massive campaign against de facto school segregation. Overcrowded classrooms and underfunded programs consistently plague urban school systems, but this problem regularly landed on the desk of administrators who rarely proposed robust solutions. The continued lack of change to resolve these issues wore down the Black community of Chicago through Willis' tenure, inevitably leading to massive protests and boycotts that achieved their main goal, the resignation of Benjamin Willis.

[47] Kerr, James. "Ben Willis After Chicago: He's in Florida Now, and His Troubles Aren't Over... Whatever Happened to Benjamin Willis?" *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996),* Oct 31, 1971. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

School Boycotts

Benjamin Willi's rollout of the mobile classroom units spelled his inevitable doom. He repeatedly doubled down on his plans for resolving urban schooling issues, and his intense distaste for integration. After nearly a year of mobile classrooms and several cases of double-shift schedules, the activist community possessed the backing of a significant parent population to organize massive protests. Over his final years, Benjamin Willis would face several massive protests of his administration. Distrust and anger with the Chicago government existed in the Black community long before Willis, but his actions created a unified backlash. The marches and school walkouts focused on the role he specifically played in harming the Black community. The posters and signs of protestors proclaimed the desire to remove Willis from his position. He actively attacked Chicago's Black community and cut off the avenues for Black activists to support and improve their schools.

The protest movement for integration grew massively during Willis' tenure. The unique developments resulting from integration of the military allowed for returning veterans to demand the same treatment in their hometowns. Historian Elizabeth Hinton frames this phenomenon succinctly in her work, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime,* which investigates the changing relationship between the government and Black people in the 20th century. She argues that "more than 6 million rural African Americans escaped the exploitation and terror of Southern segregationist regimes and moved to Northern cities… Black civil rights activists and labor leaders began organizing at the start of this migration… and pushed President Franklin D. Roosevelt to desegregate defense and government industries in the

context of World War II."[48] This success for Black activism produced a larger movement, especially in cities like Chicago, to advocate for integration throughout society. After the groundbreaking *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision, the expectation from activists was an end to the poor conditions of Black public schools. The concept of separate but equal shattered with this case, and the standing of Chicago Public Schools seemed under attack. Hinton also points out the importance of youth in these protest movements, which becomes clear looking to the massive boycotts discussed later in the section.[49]

An early example of the style of protest against CPS in this time took place in September of 1963. Approximately a dozen activists marched into Beale Grade School demanding a meeting with principal Willard Johnston. When the administration refused a meeting, the protestors sat down in front of the office doors and refused to move. Eventually, police picked up and dragged the protestors away, while a significant public viewership had formed. This story repeated itself across Chicago's urban schools dozens of times during Willis's tenure, with limited success at the small scale.

Another protest of nearly 10,000 Black community members occurred in July of 1965. These protests became a regularity in Chicago during the final years of Willis' tenure, and his responses show his ascension to a figurehead of segregation. When pressed by journalists to meet with and resolve the issues introduced by protestors, Willis deflected the questions. He instead posited that his human relations staff held responsibility for tasks of this kind, and that

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[48] Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, pg. 11.

[49] Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, pg. 11.

no meetings with that staff had been denied. Willis showed the public repeatedly that his administration knew of the issues facing Black schools but refused to acknowledge fault. Further they lacked the conviction to act on the continued overcrowding after the school building projects proved too little to solve the issue.

Many activists felt that the work was just beginning for the fight for integrated schooling. The *Chicago Defender* writer Chuck Stone called for further boycotts to force CPS to immediately integrate all schools. Reflecting on the results of the first protest, Stone wrote, "Ben Willis is still with us, and so are our Birmingham-like segregated schools."[50] The memory and reality of Southern segregation resonated through Chicago's Black community, harkening back to the time before the Great Migration when many of these Black Chicagoans grew up through Jim Crow. Looking back to the 1958 New York case of the Harlem 9, Stone continued with the argument that de facto segregation is always inferior. The only possible way to achieve true equality of education was to remove Willis and integrate the schools, without those results, more boycotts and protests were needed. This understanding fundamentally attacked the claims of both CPS and Benjamin Willis, who repeatedly argued that the only segregation relevant in government policy is de jure.

In February of 1964, both Benjamin Willis and Mayor Daley faced another potential mass boycott of schools. Black newspapers from the South Side frequently contained proclamations such as, "we can wait no longer," and, "we have already allowed one more

[50] Peggy Robinson, "Benjamin Willis: Symbol of Segregation: School Chief Key Target of Rights Groups" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973),* Feb 18, 1964. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

semester of segregated, inferior education."[51] The mood remained tense in the activist community as well. Protest organizers, most notably the Coordinating Council of Community Organization (CCCO), threatened of repeated boycotts if their demands were not met by both the city government and CPS.

With these organizers creating a potential disaster situation for Chicago politics, Mayor Daley found an unlikely ally in the Black community. Both the NAACP and the Urban League publicly announced their unwillingness to support the protests. This being the second potential boycott, and lacking the support of these powerful national organizations, Willis and Daley held a solid foundation for their position. Over the next several weeks, they repeatedly denied meetings with activists, instead criticizing the organizers for their efforts. [52]

[51] "Politicians using NAACP, Urban League to Fight Chicago's School Boycott: Leaders Reject Daley's Offer for Meeting." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973),* Feb 05, 1964. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

[52] "Oct. 22, 1963: Chicago School Boycott," Zinn Education Project, October 23, 2021, https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/1963-chicago-school-boycott/.

One of the most significant protests occurred on October 22nd, 1964. Local newspapers and community organizations worked to coordinate a massive school boycott to show the nation the students and families that Willis ignored. Many of the activists proposed solutions to the problems facing the school system. Most importantly, the end of the Willis administration. Further, they called for a new system in which Black Chicagoans held positions of authority to control funding and administrative duties in governing bodies.[53]

Conclusion

Following the Emancipation of Black people in America, White power structures repeatedly sought means to reenforce their power. In the South, Jim Crow laws explicitly segregated communities. The root idea behind segregation was the denial of equal access to Black people, and the complete separation of the racial groups. Through the early 20th century thousands of Black people defected from their Southern homes with the hopes of finding equality away from the land in which they suffered. Nearly 600,000 Black people eventually moved to Chicago during the Great Migration, dramatically altering the demography of the northern city. As a result, intense racial conflict occurred in Chicago as well as other Northern cities as White people attempted to avoid racial contact. Many White families fled the city for the security of the new suburbs allowed by the proliferation of automobiles and highways. This

[53] Peggy Robinson, "Benjamin Willis: Symbol of Segregation: School Chief Key Target of Rights Groups" *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973),* Feb 18, 1964. http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login.

White Flight created a new city structure divided along racial boundaries, with Whites on the Northside and Blacks on the Southside.

This new means of segregation created an environment ripe for exploitation by the government. When *Brown v Board of Education* outlawed explicit segregation on the basis of race, many activists presumed integration would follow. However, demographic changes that preserve segregation based on personal choices presented a new system. Many White Nationalists and ineffectual government employees argued that the Supreme Court case only outlawed de jure segregation. This means that the only role the government must play is to ensure no laws explicitly segregate along a racial basis. Chicago achieved racial segregation largely on a de facto basis, where economic pressures and personal decisions largely created the North-South divide. The argument of de facto versus de jure segregation evolved into the main racial conflict in government activity.

The key backing for many Black activists in this argument existed in the school system. Chicago Public Schools operated on an intensely segregated basis due to the geographical and demographic changes. The financial backing and funding basis of public schools in the city also meant that schools in poorer communities suffered extremely to provide adequate supplies and salaries for teachers. This created an environment where classrooms quickly overcrowded and failed to provide equal learning conditions in poor communities. Since the poorest communities in Chicago were largely Black neighborhoods, Black students suffered substantially.

Through the 1950's and 60's, Benjamin Willis worked as Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools. He previously held positions in several large urban school districts on the east

coast and held high regard nationally as an educator. Arriving in Chicago, many residents held high hopes for the transformations and improvements Willis would bring to their communities. However, over the course of his tenure, Willis repeatedly failed students and parents. Class overcrowding repeatedly found its way onto Willis's desk as the major issue in public schools. White classrooms in northern districts laid empty while southern classrooms burst at the seams with 40 or more students. His initial response to this issue was a school building campaign. Willis oversaw the construction of over 100 schools during the 1950's, which earned him the nickname "Ben the Builder." However, the issue of class size quickly returned. As the decade ended and the 60's began, Willis sought new means of addressing the issue. Responding to the *Brown* decision, Willis repeatedly argued that CPS bore no responsibility to integrate the schools. He continued to oppose integration and worked with Mayor Richard Daley to oppose government enforcement.

Black communities and organizers in Chicago worked constantly to oppose Willis' administration. The Coordinating Council of Community Organizations worked to manage the numerous protests throughout the city. Frequently small collections of parents stepped into schools with the intention of confronting administrators who supported backwards policies. These smaller scale conflicts inevitably grew into larger city-wide affairs. Eventually Willis faced major school boycotts in 1964, in which hundreds of thousands of students left their shoddy classrooms and marched through the streets calling for change in the administration. The demands of these protestors were simple, remove Willis from office and provide Black community members more opportunities and roles in administration.

By 1965, Willis' contract ended, and he sought a new four-year deal to continue his work in Chicago. A small group of board members opposed this renewal, and a compromise was reached that granted Willis one more year as Superintendent with the caveat that he resigns after that time. The protests against this symbol of White Supremacy achieved one victory in their fight for equal education. However, the hopes for integration and adequate funding quickly lost traction. Without government intervention, no administration pushed to integrate Chicago Schools for nearly two decades. Briefly in the 1980's, the federal government once again acknowledged that the city schools failed to abide by standards of integration and equity. This second intervention from Washington also failed to achieve any concrete change, and activists to this day fight for the true integration of Chicago schools. As of 2020, Chicago remains one of the most segregated cities in the United States. Nearly 80% of schools meet the criteria for classification as "racially homogeneous," and demographic data supports the conclusion that little change occurred.

The story of Benjamin Willis offers a keen insight into the focus of historical events. Unlike the myriad stories of racial conflict during the 1950's and 60's that recurs throughout classrooms and media in the modern day, this story rarely sees the light of day. Even students from around the Chicagoland reach the end of their formal education without ever hearing the term "Willis Wagons" or learning about the 1963 school boycott. This event pulled 47% of students out of the classroom for a massive day of protest in one of the largest cities in America yet falls to the side of the historical narrative. Most of the education surrounding integration and the aftermath of *Brown v Board* revolves around stories of success in which corrupt and racist officials lose under the weight of the federal government, even after years of conflict. But

the story of Chicago schools ends in failure. Benjamin Willis inevitably resigns, but that minute success stands as the one award for the decade of conflict over children's education. The landscape of Chicago largely remained, and the protests bore little change to the structures of White Supremacy that maintained segregation throughout CPS. To this day, a significant portion of public schools in the city exist in racial homogeneity. Black students, especially on the South Side, continue to fall victim to poor funding and teacher scarcity. Quality teachers often leave these schools to search for better paying jobs in suburban communities. The demands and pleadings of protestors in 1963 continue to ring true in the minds of Black students and parents in Chicago.

The failure results from the common issue of dismantling White Supremacy. Without robust and aggressive measures, the power structures created throughout American history continue to impact our lives. Benjamin Willis did not create segregation in Chicago, nor did he necessarily approve of the phenomenon. However, he received an opportunity from his standing to fundamentally change the operation of the second largest school district in the country. Rather than pushing through integration measures or formulating new policies to equitably redistribute funding, he capitulated and squabbled with protestors. Willis continued to argue that the job of integration and racial progress fell on society at large and not schools or local governments. After his decade of protests, band-aid solutions, and government investigation the problematic institutions remained, and Willis resigned. By removing the figurehead of segregation in Chicago, the crisis ended. The massive movement slowed and sputtered, eventually resolving to acquiescence. The fight for equality needs to achieve goals

beyond the individuals, and the figures leading government organizations cannot be the only casualties in the push for an equitable society.

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