Essays

SEF and Education: Looking Back At the Turn of Two Centuries

by
Lynn Huntley
President, Southern Education Foundation (SEF)

In 1890, the recently emancipated Black population living in the American South was dirt poor. The 250 years of enslavement had ended, but in a real sense Blacks were not yet "free" or "equal" in comparison to Whites.

The ideology of White supremacy and Black inferiority was dominant. Embittered by the outcome of the Civil War, the abolition of slavery, and Northern efforts to help Blacks during the Reconstruction era, Southern Whites sought to maintain their monopoly on social, political and economic power.

Gains made by Blacks in securing employment or voting rights during Reconstruction had proven to be transitory. Blacks faced spiraling violence and intimidation. Historian Lerone Bennett in *Before the Mayflower* reports that between 1890 and 1900, over 1,200 Blacks were lynched, many for such "crimes" as

> testifying against whites in court, seeking another job, using offensive language, failing to say "mister" to whites, disputing the price of blackberries, attempting to vote and accepting the job of postmaster.

W.E.B. DuBois, a scholar/activist who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, describes the phases of Black education in the South during these times in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

> From the close of the war until 1876, was the period of uncertain groping and temporary relief. There were army schools, mission schools, and schools of the Freedmen's Bureau in chaotic disarrangement seeking system and cooperation. Then followed ten years of constructive definite effort toward the building of complete school systems in the South. Normal schools and colleges were founded for the freedmen, and teachers trained there to man the public schools. Meantime, starting in this decade, yet especially developing from 1885 to 1895, began the industrial revolution in the South. The land saw glimpses of a new destiny and the stirring of new ideals. The educational system striving to complete itself saw new obstacles and a field of work ever broader and deeper. The Negro colleges, hurriedly founded, were inadequately equipped, illogically distributed, and of varying efficiency and

> grade. The normal and high schools were doing little more than common-school work, and the common schools were training but a third of the children who ought to be in them, and training these too often poorly.... In the midst of the larger problem of Negro education sprang up the more practical question of work, the inevitable economic quandary that faces a people in the transition from slavery to freedom, and especially those who make that change amid hate and prejudice, lawlessness and ruthless competition.

Illiteracy rates were high in 1890. The Freedmen's Bureau's work had ended by 1870, having spent an estimated $5 million on schooling for the newly emancipated. The Southern economy's agrarian nature, however, made education a luxury. Blacks were at the bottom of the bottom, usually relegated to being servants, sharecropping or engaging in stoop labor.

Children were not exempt from work. There were no child labor laws. Nearly half of 10-15 year old Black children worked in the fields and 86 percent of students—both Black and White—received instruction less than six months per year.

"Less than 40 percent of the children of school age in the region attended school regularly, and of these only one in ten reached the fifth grade" writes historian Harry Ashmore in *The Negro and the Schools*. And despite the establishment of a network of industrial and training schools throughout the South and the growth in the number of Black teachers "[o]ver 11 percent of the Whites and 48 percent of the Negroes lacked even the rudiments of reading and writing" in the 1890s.

By 1900, one third of school age Black children in the Southern states attended school: twenty-two percent of Black 5-9 year olds, compared with 37 percent of Whites; and fifty-two percent of Black 10-14 year olds, compared with 76 percent of Whites, notes James Anderson in *The Education of Blacks in the South*. Often isolated in one-room schoolhouses, the quality of elementary and secondary education provided for Blacks was invariably inferior to that afforded to Whites.

Of a population of almost 9 million, fewer than 4000 African Americans attended colleges and universities in 1900. But against the odds, a network of 34 recently formed historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) around the country, most of which were located in the South, managed to graduate students whose achievements were disproportionate to their humble settings. Although many were little more than high schools in their early stages of development and the students whom they received had often had only rudimentary elementary and secondary school education, these HBCUs were the Black community's higher educational lifeline.

HBCUs were the primary engines for training Black teachers. As DuBois observed:

> Southern whites would not teach them [Blacks]; Northern whites in sufficient numbers could not be had. If the Negro was to learn, he must teach himself, and the most effective help that could be given him was the establishment of schools to train Negro teachers....

> A study conducted by the Conference at Atlanta University found that by 1900, there were over two thousand Blacks who had received bachelor's degrees [from such institutions]: fifty three percent of these graduates were teachers, presidents of institutions, heads of normal schools, or principals of city school systems.

As the 1890s ended, the Black population was disadvantaged by every material measure, compared to Whites. But one positive consequence of the racial isolation was that a network of Black businessmen and women, teachers, ministers, and service providers began to emerge—antecedents to members of today's middle class.

Securing education in order to achieve a better quality of life and standard of living was the first priority. Levels of educational attainment increased steadily, despite the fact that Black schools remained hard to staff. In the absence of other career paths, however, the teaching profession was the field of choice for the community's best and brightest, followed only by training for the ministry. The number of Black teachers grew.

> Black schools (public and private) at all levels were overcrowded, lacking in equipment, and unequally funded, compared to those for Whites. Black educational leaders saw the need, but lacked the resources to equip their students to compete in the industrializing economy.

Heedless of the impact of the multiple disadvantages from which Blacks suffered, and determined to keep Blacks "back," there was little support among many White Southerners for efforts to undo the consequences of past injustices.

But there were always some Whites who were fair-minded. They and northern philanthropists who contributed to Black education in the region helped keep Black people's hope for a better future through education alive.

One hundred years ago, organized philanthropy in the South was largely inattentive to the pressing educational needs of African Americans. Therefore, one of SEF's earliest priorities was to document those needs and publicize the results. At a time when many might have wished to forget or at least ignore the inequality between Blacks and Whites, these reports sparked attention to the inequity and fueled public and private debate and responses.

Recognizing the importance of investing in human capital in order to improve the quality of education afforded to the poor and Blacks, through the Peabody Fund, summer courses were offered to help improve the skills of teachers working with Black students. The courses brought teachers together to exchange information and ideas about how to promote improved student achievement and what to teach. One two-

week institute involved 1,170 teachers, a not inconsequential feat. Efforts of such scale made a demonstrable difference in the quality of teaching over time.

The Jeanes Supervisors' Program, which began shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted for sixty years, is one of SEF's most well-known efforts to help improve the quality of teaching. Exceptional educators, known as Jeanes' Supervisors, were recruited, trained and then sent to travel across the South to provide oversight and training to other teachers of poor Blacks, who were often isolated and forced to work without support of colleagues and with limited resources. The Jeanes Supervisors helped them develop their talents, respond to pressing needs and inspired them to strive for greater heights of service and achievement. The Jeanes Supervisors were often troubleshooters, mediating between local Black schools and White school boards and superintendents.

With spirit and creativity, the Jeanes Supervisors tackled their diverse tasks, helping Blacks in the South to survive and improve the quality of their lives through education. Their informal motto was "we do the next needed thing."

By 1954, when the United States Supreme Court declared enforced racial segregation in publicly supported schools violative of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, there were over 500 Jeanes Supervisors working in the South. The success of the program prompted emulation and replication in other parts of the world and in many White schools, as well.

Today, there are a plethora of organizations of all stripes, agencies and programs that are contemporary models of programs that SEF predecessor funds began over a century ago. This is a measure of the prescience of SEF's founding donors. True to its mission, SEF continues to be riveted on timeless elements that make for equity and excellence in education.