

increase the 15 mill limit to 18 mills, and by continuing the practice of earmarking funds for public schools. As one analyst described the new constitution, "It makes an attempt at the co-ordination of all education using the only acceptable tool available to state government, financial control." Rural interests were more satisfied with the compromise since it retained the current apportionment with its disproportionate representation of rural districts.<sup>133</sup>

While controversy erupted on a number of key provisions in the proposed constitution, the most heated debate centered on the failure to apportion the legislature fairly. The Democratic party, the Michigan AFL-CIO, and the Detroit NAACP, which had all fought for reapportionment throughout the 1950s, felt that Romney had betrayed them. Almost immediately after the convention adjourned, the Michigan Democratic party filed briefs in support of the Tennessee suit that eventually led to the *Baker v. Carr* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court. When the court handed down its "one man, one vote" decision in 1962, Michigan Democrats, liberals, and labor leaders were jubilant.<sup>134</sup>

By 1970, however, much of that joy had vanished. *Baker v. Carr* did break the hold rural districts had on the Michigan legislature, but, ironically, it also led to the reduction of the Detroit delegation in the legislature. Because the suburbs had burgeoned and the city had lost population between 1960 and 1970, following *Baker v. Carr*, the Detroit delegation in the Michigan house fell from twenty-six members to twenty-one and Detroit's seats in the senate dropped from nine to seven.<sup>135</sup> Thus, the unexpected consequence of Detroit's victory in this protracted struggle against rural and corporate interests was the loss of representation and power on the state level. Besides losing state representation and power, Detroit suddenly faced a new suburban power bloc in state politics. The traditional rural-urban polarization in the legislature was now replaced by a rural-suburban-urban configuration. In addition, as the demographic character of the Detroit metropolitan area changed, that new political configuration was frequently shaped by racial politics that pitted white suburbs against the increasingly black city in the struggle for power and resources.<sup>136</sup>

### **The Civil Rights Struggle and the Detroit Public Schools, 1950–60**

In May of 1950, the *Detroit News* brought together a panel of African-American leaders to discuss the problems facing their community. When asked if they were satisfied with the education their children were getting in the public schools, the leaders responded with "a loud and unanimous 'No!'"

As evidence that Detroit was operating a separate and unequal school system for black children, they pointed to the continuing school board policy of segregating black teachers in majority black schools and the “disgraceful” physical neglect of schools in black neighborhoods.<sup>137</sup> Black leaders had been protesting these conditions for almost two decades and, as the 1950s began, the problems seemed no closer to resolution. Indeed, as the Detroit schools lurched from one financial crisis to another, schools in black neighborhoods seemed destined to fall even further behind in the battle for equal treatment and equal resources.

Yet, beginning in 1956, following the election of Remus Robinson and Leonard Kastle to the school board, black protests against segregation in the Detroit schools started to have an impact. In alliance with the UAW, SOS, and the Americans for Democratic Action, black Detroiters mounted a sustained and increasingly effective effort directed at six areas: ousting superintendent Arthur Dondineau; adding and physically improving schools in black neighborhoods; increasing the number of black teachers, counselors, and administrators; ending the policy of segregating black educators in majority black schools; upgrading the instructional and the curricular quality in black schools; and stopping the administrative practice of gerrymandering attendance boundaries to segregate schools. With the exception of that last, volatile issue, by 1960, the liberal-labor-black coalition achieved notable successes in all of these areas.

Initially, the black community directed its efforts toward firing superintendent Arthur Dondineau, who had become a symbol of racial intolerance for blacks during the Higgenbotham and Birdhurst controversy in the late 1940s. Following the controversy, the NAACP, the *Michigan Chronicle*, and SOS continued to rail at Dondineau and at what the *Chronicle* labeled “the apparently deliberate discrimination against Negro school teachers and pupils by the Detroit Board of Education.”<sup>138</sup> In 1951, after two SOS-backed candidates were elected to the board, black Detroiters urged the board to deny Dondineau another three-year term as superintendent. Edward M. Turner, president of the Detroit NAACP, specifically protested that, under Dondineau’s administration, “discriminatory and undemocratic practices . . . have become legendary in the school system.” A. L. Zwerdling, representing the Americans for Democratic Action, echoed these denunciations and called for a total reappraisal of the school administration. Despite these protests, the board reappointed Dondineau, but, in a concession to the protestors, the board unanimously passed a resolution mandating a periodic review of the actions of the school administration in such areas as discrimination.<sup>139</sup>

Unfortunately, over the next few years, virtually nothing came of the resolution. Black Detroiters saw it as another example of the board's penchant for what one civil rights leader described as "a lot of say-so but not much do-so."<sup>140</sup> A 1951 study by the Detroit Urban League, for example, found that black children attended the oldest schools in the oldest section of the city, and that the board had done virtually nothing to improve conditions in these schools. Three years later, despite the massive school-building program, schools in black neighborhoods remained physically among the worst in the city. As late as February, 1956, the *Michigan Chronicle* declared that it is the "apparent policy on the part of the Board of Education to allow school facilities in the older areas of the city to deteriorate and decline."<sup>141</sup>

Just as the problems of inadequate school facilities went unresolved, so did the practices of racially gerrymandering attendance boundaries, segregating black teachers in black schools, overloading classes in black schools, and offering an inferior curriculum to black students.<sup>142</sup> The protests of civil rights groups and the black newspapers made no dent in the policies of the school administration. Indeed, Arthur Dondineau responded to the protests with contempt. When asked by a black reporter if he was aware that black teachers were only assigned to black schools, he replied tartly, "I know because I put them there."<sup>143</sup> Such attitudes led the *Michigan Chronicle* to declare that "like the tentacles of some monstrous octopus, the evil of racial discrimination lies entwined about the heart of the Detroit School System."<sup>144</sup>

Three days after that statement appeared, however, the black community gained its most positive victory to date, as Dr. Remus G. Robinson became the first black elected to the Detroit board of education. The election of Robinson and NAACP member Leonard Kasle was the most notable success of the liberal-labor-black coalition until then, and it led the coalition to renew its efforts to end racial discrimination in the Detroit schools. In August, black parents succeeded, for the first time, in getting the board to rescind a decision to change an attendance boundary that would have added to school segregation. In January, 1956, a protest led by longtime black activist Snow Grigsby, Congressman Charles Diggs, Jr., and the DFT succeeded in getting the board to upgrade the facilities at Miller High School. Despite opposition from lame-duck Superintendent Dondineau, in June the board approved a resolution drafted by Remus Robinson that provided \$850,000 for the improvement of Miller High School. Black leaders were delighted, but five months later their victory turned bittersweet when the board voted to restore Miller to its previous status as an intermediate school in order to relieve overcrowding at four eastside elementary schools.<sup>145</sup>

While the end results of the struggle to improve Miller High School were less than satisfying, there was growing evidence of a change in the racial attitude of the school board. Indeed, in the fall of 1956, the *Michigan Chronicle* stated that, in the previous six months, the racial situation in the Detroit schools “appears to be considerably improved” due in large part to the “more liberal character” of the board of education. The most dramatic evidence of that improvement was the appointment of Samuel Brownell as the new superintendent, replacing Arthur Dondineau. Almost immediately after his appointment, Brownell won high praise from civil rights leaders by publicly repudiating Dondineau’s policy of segregating black teachers and announcing a “color-blind” policy for teacher placements.<sup>146</sup>

The improving racial situation in the Detroit schools was also influenced by the great changes in race relations that were sweeping the country during these years. Many Detroiters, both black and white, were deeply involved in the larger civil rights movement and they increasingly turned their attention to racial problems in the city and its schools. The efforts to desegregate the Little Rock schools in the late 1950s were particularly important, since they provided an object lesson in how a determined group of integrationists could succeed against seemingly insurmountable odds.<sup>147</sup>

The campaign for educational equality in Detroit was not only boosted by events nationally but also by the efforts of the 1958 Citizens Advisory Committee on School Needs. The Center Region subcommittee of the CAC included such civil rights leaders as Mrs. James J. McClendon, wife of a former president of the NAACP, Arthur Johnson, also of the NAACP, and Francis Kornegay, executive secretary of the Urban League.<sup>148</sup> Their investigation provided irrefutable evidence of discrimination against black Detroiters and highlighted many of the problems that African-Americans had been protesting for years, including the deterioration and decay of schools in black neighborhoods and a curriculum in predominantly black secondary schools that clearly shortchanged the students.<sup>149</sup>

Other CAC members, such as Al Barbour of the Wayne County AFL-CIO and Charles Wartman, editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*, also guided various CAC subcommittees in producing reports that went beyond the most optimistic expectations of the black and liberal leaders in highlighting the racial problems of the school system. In late November, 1958, for example, the CAC subcommittee on school-community relations released a study that explicitly detailed the segregationist policies of the school system. The

*Michigan Chronicle* was jubilant, declaring that “hammer blows have been struck at racial segregation in the Detroit public schools by a subcommittee of the Citizens Advisory Committee on School Needs.”<sup>150</sup>

One week later, upon the release of the report of the CAC subcommittee on school buildings, the *Chronicle* editorialized that the report demonstrated unequivocally “that the abandonment of vast areas to inferior buildings and inferior interests has resulted in inferior instruction, handicapped children and has in general lowered the standing of the entire school system.” The final report of the CAC did not disappoint the black community either, since it contained a series of recommendations that directly addressed all of these problems. In addition, the CAC strongly recommended that school leaders devote more attention to improving relations between the school system and the black community.<sup>151</sup>

More important than these suggestions was the degree to which the board actually carried them out. During the campaign for the 1959 millage increase and bond issue, Samuel Brownell and other school leaders declared that a large portion of the construction funds would go toward improving conditions in the overcrowded and decaying schools “within the Boulevard,” essentially the black section of Detroit that extended south of Grand Boulevard and included the lower east and lower west sides of the city.<sup>152</sup> In a clear signal to liberal Detroiters that the board intended to fulfill that campaign promise, in September, 1959, the board announced the appointment of former SOS president Merle Henrickson as director of planning and school building studies for the system.<sup>153</sup>

Black leaders kept steady pressure on the school administration to insure that the construction program went forward. As a consequence of these efforts, between 1959 and 1962, the board spent over \$69 million of the more than \$92 million in construction funds, 75 percent of the total, in areas of the city with the largest proportion of black students, particularly in the central and eastern administrative districts.<sup>154</sup>

The increase in the number of black teachers, counselors, and administrators was equally dramatic during these years. In 1949, the 386 black teachers employed by the Detroit public schools accounted for slightly more than 5 percent of the total professional staff. By 1961, according to the first official racial accounting of staff and students since 1949, the number of black teachers had jumped to 2,275, almost 22 percent of the teaching force. This increase was the direct result of a number of fair employment policies and practices instituted by the board and Brownell since September, 1956.<sup>155</sup> The number of black counselors and administrators also increased in this

period, but less dramatically. In the 1955–56 school year there were six black counselors; in 1961–62 there were nineteen, and, by 1964–65, there were forty-seven. In the same years, the number of black assistant principals went from nine to fourteen to twenty and the number of black principals went from two to seven to nine. In all, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as a consequence of combined pressures from the black community, liberal organizations, findings of the CAC report, and increased funds from the 1959 millage, the Detroit schools became a national leader in the number and proportion of black staff members.<sup>156</sup>

In addition to concerns about staffing, black leaders and parents were also determined to upgrade the quality of the educational program their children were getting. In many ways, these curricular concerns were similar to those expressed by the *Free Press* and the *News* in the spring of 1958. Indeed, at precisely the same time that these newspapers were describing the decline in standards generally, a group of black parents with children at McMichael Intermediate School and Northwestern High School led a protest at a board meeting to specifically denounce the lack of college preparatory courses at these schools. The parents also echoed complaints about indifferent and inadequate teachers who were lax in discipline and maintained low academic standards.<sup>157</sup>

Probably nowhere in the school system was the decline in educational standards worse than in the predominantly black schools in the city. Investigating racial and educational changes in Doty Elementary School, one researcher reported, in 1957, “There have been many complaints from parents that their children are not now studying the same curriculum that had been offered to the white children. . . . It is felt that there has been more than just a change in some subjects, that there has been an attempt to change the child’s goals in a different direction; that is, away from college preparatory to vocational and frill studies.” Not long after the McMichael and Northwestern protests, Remus Robinson, president of the board, also deplored the policy of tracking black students into “watered-down” courses that provided them with none of the knowledge and few of the skills to compete academically.<sup>158</sup>

As in the past, most of the problem lay with the general track of the high schools, into which the administration placed large numbers of poor and black students. In her 1961 study of the Detroit schools, Patricia Cayo Sexton found that 48 percent of the students from the poorest families in the city were in the general track. While Sexton did not analyze these data by race, given the high rate of poverty in the black community, it is likely that many, if not most, of the students assigned to the general track were black.<sup>159</sup>

By 1962, however, it appeared that the problems associated with the general track pervaded almost all aspects of secondary education for black students. In February of that year, a scathing series of articles apparently written by an anonymous black teacher about Northwestern High School showed that the quality of the educational program in the school appeared to have worsened since the McMichael and Northwestern protests in 1958. The teacher declared that, due to massive overcrowding and utter indifference on the part of school administrators, Northwestern had become an “attendance school,” which meant that “if a student just keeps going long enough . . . he will be graduated; regardless if he has learned anything or not.” The teacher noted that not only had administrators lowered the grading scale so that students could pass more easily, but they also reprimanded teachers who failed too many students. Deploring the lack of academic rigor, the teacher concluded that the lack of “set standards” was a deliberate policy implemented by “people who believe that Negro Children are inferior as students so there is no sense spending a lot of public money trying to educate them as white students are educated.”<sup>160</sup>

Unlike the more general criticisms about the deterioration of the school program abroad in Detroit, the author of the article on Northwestern was specifically concerned that the root of the problems in predominantly black schools was racism. Black parents, for example, not only denounced the declining standards but also questioned why these standards seemed to have declined faster in predominantly black schools and why black students were disproportionately represented in the least academically rigorous programs that the school system offered. These concerns led black parents and civil rights leaders to redouble their efforts to end discriminatory policies and practices.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, black leaders had frequently condemned school administrators for their lack of sensitivity to the special educational problems of black children. These concerns were often expressed in protests against culturally biased IQ tests and racially biased textbooks, in demands that black history be included in the Detroit social studies curriculum, and, more generally, in complaints about teachers and administrators who failed to recognize that educating children from poor, black families often demanded different pedagogical strategies than those that worked with other groups of children.<sup>161</sup> The *Michigan Chronicle* noted in 1963, “. . . the Detroit school system, like most of our public school systems, is oriented to the concept that each child should come from a white, Protestant, middle class background.” Many black leaders believed that teachers imbued with

these attitudes were a primary reason for the poor educational performance of black children.<sup>162</sup> As with black demands for school construction and the appointment of more black teachers and administrators, demands that school leaders become more sensitive to the educational problems of black children also bore some fruit in the late 1950s.

By far the most important effort to redesign educational programs for inner-city children was the Great Cities School Improvement project that Samuel Brownell played a leading role in developing. This “bellwether” program began in September, 1959, when Brownell provided two inner-city elementary schools and one junior high with additional staff members who were to work with teachers and parents to improve educational quality.<sup>163</sup> According to board member Louise Grace, these efforts were a “departure from the accepted pattern of expecting all children to respond to standardized methods of learning and the beginning of an effort to develop new motivations and techniques of learning based upon the child’s own special background and experience.” The black community applauded the pilot program. The *Michigan Chronicle* declared that the Great Cities project could well mark the dawning of a “new day” in education in Detroit.<sup>164</sup>

Over the next few years, with the aid of grants from the Ford Foundation, the board expanded the pilot program to include seven schools with 420 staff members and 10,400 students. In addition, the Great Cities program expanded into fourteen other large, urban school systems. The program in Detroit provided numerous compensatory education programs, intensive workshops to help teachers bridge the cultural gap between themselves and their students, opportunities to create new curricular materials including a groundbreaking set of preprimers featuring black children, encouragement for teachers to employ novel educational methods, and a concerted effort to involve parents in their children’s education. While none of these efforts influenced achievement as powerfully as urban educators had hoped they would, the Great Cities program nevertheless greatly enhanced the national reputation of the school system and served as the prototype for many of the remedial and compensatory education programs of the Great Society.<sup>165</sup>

Like the massive school building campaign in black neighborhoods and the substantial increase in the number of black teachers, the pedagogical changes that Brownell and his staff introduced in the Great Cities program marked a dramatic shift from past practices of the school system. There can be little doubt that, after 1956, school leaders in Detroit were more sensitive to racial issues and more willing to alter policies and programs and provide necessary funds to improve education in black neighborhoods. By the early



1960s, due to the efforts of the liberal-labor-black coalition, the Detroit schools had become a national leader in race relations. Indeed, there appeared to be fairly broad-based support throughout the city for all of these efforts. Yet in the one most important area of race relations, the actual integration of schools, the problems Detroit faced proved to be little different than those in any large city in the nation.

### **Controversies over Boundaries and Busing, 1959–62**

For more than two decades, black Detroiters had strenuously objected to administrative gerrymandering of school attendance boundaries that deliberately segregated black and white children. Following the election of the more liberal board in 1955, the publication of the CAC report in 1958, and the events in Little Rock, black Detroiters hoped to see substantial changes in that policy as well. Indeed, the CAC report had specifically recommended that, in establishing school boundaries, the board should seek “the inclusion of all ethnic, racial and religious groups residing in each school area.”<sup>166</sup> By the early 1960s, black leaders were determined to make the school system live up to that recommendation.

Unfortunately, no issue involving civil rights and education was more volatile than the setting of attendance boundaries. Ever since the creation of Miller High School, African-Americans had routinely protested that whenever school leaders drew new boundaries to alleviate overcrowding and reduce half-day sessions, the new boundaries almost invariably increased racial segregation. Many white Detroiters, on the other hand, vehemently opposed any boundary changes that appeared to disturb the racial character of a district. Between 1959 and 1962, there were a number of serious clashes over attendance boundaries and busing, clashes that ominously foreshadowed the fierce, pitched battle over these issues that raged in the 1970s. These early struggles over boundaries and busing were also the first hints of weakness in the liberal-labor-black coalition.

In early October, 1959, the issue of school integration in Detroit burst into the news when school leaders announced plans to transfer 74 black students from the badly overcrowded Pattengill elementary to Houghton school, another predominantly black school that was more than four miles away. A well-organized group of black parents from Pattengill immediately denounced the transfer, noting that two predominantly white schools, which were closer to Pattengill, had space for their children. The parents claimed that the administration had bypassed these schools to avoid integration. When

these initial protests yielded no results, the parents refused to allow their children to board the buses for Houghton. In early November, they called a one-day boycott of Pattengill that was observed by more than 1,000 students, about half the student body.<sup>167</sup>

While this protest had some important similarities to the Higgenbotham-Birdhurst controversy in the late 1940s, the results were quite different. In a meeting with the parents and board members, Brownell admitted that the administration had erred in not assigning the students to the nearby schools. He promised to correct the problem at the end of the semester. Board members Robinson and Kasle assured the parents that they would develop a policy to avoid these situations in the future. The parents were overjoyed, and the *Chronicle* and the *News* editorialized that an important step had been taken toward racial equality in the Detroit public schools.<sup>168</sup>

In many ways, however, the most important outcome of the Pattengill controversy was the creation of a new citizens committee to investigate the allegations of racial discrimination in the school system. In January, 1960, the board set up the Citizens Advisory Committee on Equal Educational Opportunities (CAC-EEO), which was chaired by Probate Court Judge Nathan J. Kaufman and included among its members Arthur Johnson, executive director of the NAACP, Circuit Court Judge Wade McCree, the first black elected to countywide office in Wayne County, Al Barbour, president of the Wayne County AFL-CIO, and Roy Eppert, president of Burroughs Corporation. The committee began its work in May and soon found itself embroiled in the renewed controversies about segregation and attendance boundaries.<sup>169</sup>

This time the protests about boundary changes came from the white residents of the northwest section of the city. In mid-October, 1960, the school administration announced that it was going to bus approximately 300 black students from overcrowded schools in the central district to three underutilized schools, Guest, Monnier, and Noble, in the almost entirely white northwestern district. White parents from these three schools immediately attacked the busing plan and threatened to keep their children home when the black students arrived.<sup>170</sup> A front-page editorial in the *Redford Record*, a local newspaper in northwest Detroit, resurrected allegations of left-wing conspiracies in the Detroit schools. Blasting the busing plan as a plot by “leftists within the school system,” the editorial also alleged that these conspirators had pressured the board of education to delay building schools “within the boulevard area” so that administrators could use evidence of overcrowding as a pretext for “forced integration.” With passions inflamed

by these allegations, a group of white parents formed the Northwest Detroit Parents Committee dedicated to fighting the busing plan and committed to recalling all seven members of the board of education.<sup>171</sup>

In an attempt to calm the situation, Samuel Brownell, backed by representatives from the Board of Commerce, AFL-CIO, Detroit Council of Churches, Catholic Human Relations Council, Jewish Community Council, the NAACP, and Urban League met with the parents committee. Before an audience of 2,000 angry community members, Brownell presented a detailed account of how and why the three northwest schools had been chosen for the busing program. His most powerful point was that, over the past ten years, the school administration had routinely bused students to the three schools in question. "The matter of transporting pupils is not new to these schools," he declared. The difference, this time, was that black students would be riding the buses.<sup>172</sup>

The parents, however, would not accept Brownell's explanation nor would they heed blandishments on toleration from the representatives of the Board of Commerce, AFL-CIO, or the religious leaders. This protest was unquestionably a populist revolt that bypassed all of the established interest groups. Tempers flared, and the parents warned Brownell that they would keep their children home if the board persisted with the busing plan. To emphasize their determination, members of the parents committee blatantly circulated recall petitions during the meeting and declared that, with a new board of education, they would get Brownell fired.<sup>173</sup>

Over the next three school days more than 1,300 students boycotted the schools. The Northwest Parents Committee distributed a letter that urged parents to defend their rights and blamed the situation on "Communists and fellow travelers" within the school administration. Brownell, however, refused to budge on the issue and threatened the parents with fines and jail if they continued to keep their children home. Meanwhile, under police protection, the black students were bused to the three schools. In taking this tough stand, Brownell received strong support from the *Free Press*, the *News*, the AFL-CIO, the Detroit Council of Churches, the Jewish Community Council, and the Catholic Archdiocese.<sup>174</sup>

The opposition to the busing plan collapsed by mid-November, perhaps due to Brownell's toughness but also, probably, because the school administration decided to keep the 300 black children segregated within the three schools.<sup>175</sup> In making that decision, however, the school leaders insured that absolutely no one would be satisfied with the outcome of the crisis. In December, for example, Charles L. Wells, a leader of the Detroit NAACP,

denounced the Detroit schools before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, claiming that school leaders were continuing to draw boundaries and make school assignments that reflected a deliberate policy of racial “discrimination and containment.”<sup>176</sup>

Pressure for change mounted as the civil rights struggle moved to the center of national attention. Throughout 1960–61, for example, Detroiters took great interest in the campaign to desegregate the New Orleans schools, with black leaders noting the practical irrelevancy of the *de jure* and *de facto* distinctions, since schools in Detroit were almost as segregated as those in the South. When someone on the CAC-EEO leaked a story that the committee was uncovering “shocking” evidence of segregation in the Detroit schools, Charles Wartman wondered where these people had been for the past twenty years to suddenly be “shocked” at conditions blacks had been protesting for so long. For Wartman and many other African-Americans, the time for outrage was past and the time for aggressive action had come.<sup>177</sup>

Adding to the sense that blacks could control their own political destiny was the election of the maverick, liberal Jerome Cavanagh as mayor in 1961. Cavanagh had campaigned hard in black neighborhoods, promising, among other things, to appoint a liberal police commissioner who would clean up the notoriously racist Detroit police force. This campaign strategy paid off. Despite running against practically every major interest group in Detroit, including the UAW, Cavanagh won the election handily, thanks in large part to garnering about 85 percent of the black vote. His election signaled a major shift in municipal politics. Traditional power brokers in Detroit were losing control of their constituencies and a new, more independent electorate was emerging. This political change hit the schools with full force less than one year later.<sup>178</sup>

In January, 1962, a group of black parents from the Sherrill school area launched a frontal assault against segregation in the Detroit schools. Three years earlier, school administrators had drawn a new attendance boundary that barred a small number of black students from Sherrill from attending the overcrowded, but overwhelmingly white Mackenzie High School. The new boundary assigned these students to the less crowded but largely black Central and Chadsey high schools. At the time, the NAACP, PTAs from Doty and Sherrill schools, and an ad hoc interracial committee of parents denounced the plan as blatantly discriminatory. Following these protests, Samuel Brownell agreed to indefinitely delay implementing the redistricting plan. In December, 1961, however, the school administration went forward with a new version of the plan, assigning all of the eighth

graders at Sherrill to a school in a predominantly black district, thereby insuring that they would not attend Mackenzie High School.<sup>179</sup>

Almost immediately some 300 people formed the Sherrill School Parents Committee to protest the assignments. In January, 1962, the parents filed suit against the Detroit schools alleging that the school administration was operating a separate and unequal school system for black children. In making their case, the parents reiterated virtually every criticism of the school system that blacks had been making since the 1930s, but they particularly emphasized the “drawing and redrawing and gerrymandering of school district lines” in order to segregate black children.<sup>180</sup>

The board responded by categorically denying that it “created or maintained any ‘segregated schools.’” Indeed, leaders noted that, since September, 1956, when the present board “was substantially constituted,” the school system had made great strides toward equalizing educational opportunity for all children in the city. According to the board, the racial separation that existed in the school system was due to “housing, employment, economic or other practices” outside the control or jurisdiction of the board of education. As evidence of its commitment to racial equality, the board cited the substantial construction program then underway in black neighborhoods, the large increase in the number of black teachers, and the Great Cities program. As the lawsuit proceeded, the board also adopted a series of nondiscrimination resolutions designed to demonstrate its commitment to the goal of equality of educational opportunity.<sup>181</sup>

The board was unquestionably sincere in its commitments to building new schools in black neighborhoods and hiring more black teachers. The troubling question raised by the Sherrill suit, however, focused on the board’s commitment to integration itself. A 1969 study of resource distribution and integration between 1940 and 1960, for example, found a very disturbing pattern relating declining resource allocations to rising levels of black students. The study of 164 Detroit elementary schools found that key measures of educational quality—pupil-teacher ratios, the amount of teaching done by emergency substitutes, and teacher turnover rates—deteriorated in schools undergoing racial transition. These schools generally had higher student-teacher ratios, a larger percentage of instruction done by emergency substitutes, and more teacher turnover than schools that remained all-white or all-black.<sup>182</sup> Obviously, these patterns had developed under less liberal school boards and administrations, yet to find them still persisting in 1960 adds credence to the charges brought by the Sherrill parents.

In many ways, the Sherrill case was an early version of the desegrega-

tion suits that civil rights groups would bring against northern school systems in the 1970s. Yet two important developments in Detroit set the Sherrill case apart from those later civil rights suits. First, in March, 1962, the Citizens Advisory Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity issued its report that confirmed almost every allegation made by the Sherrill parents. The CAC-EEO found that “school boundaries have been used to further racial and social class segregation” and that there was a “clear-cut pattern of racial discrimination in the assignment of teachers and principals to schools throughout the city.” The committee reported that, in February, 1961, 83 percent of the 2,275 black teachers in the school system taught in the predominantly black central, eastern, southeastern, or southern administrative districts. Only 19 black teachers, less than 1 percent, taught in the predominantly white northeastern, northwestern, and western administrative districts.<sup>183</sup>

In addition, one of the most serious findings of the report was that practically no black students participated in the apprenticeship programs that were run cooperatively by the school system, unions, and employers. Since students could not enter these programs without first having a job in the area in which they sought apprenticeships, and unions and employers frequently barred blacks from these jobs, black youths could not take advantage of the programs. As late as 1964, the Construction Trades Apprentice School, for example, enrolled 1,821 students, of whom 34 were black.<sup>184</sup> In all, the CAC-EEO report was a damning indictment of the school system. As George Crockett, Jr., one of the attorneys for the Sherrill parents noted, the “school litigation in Detroit differs from that in every other large Northern urban community because [*sic*] here all of the evidence of the segregated pattern of public school education already has been collected and published in the Citizen’s Committee Report.”<sup>185</sup>

The second way that the Sherrill case differed from later civil rights suits was that it did not result from charges brought by the Detroit NAACP or any other leading civil rights organization in the city. Indeed, the NAACP initially did not support the lawsuit. As a grass roots effort, the Sherrill suit indicated an emerging split in the African-American community between the established civil rights groups that had proceeded cautiously in alliance with white liberals and a new group of more militant parents and activists who were impatient with the slow pace of change. While the established civil rights groups could point to a number of notable successes, including the election of Remus Robinson to the school board, the substantial increase in the number of black teachers, and the massive building program in black

neighborhoods, the more militant groups responded that the Detroit schools still were essentially separate and unequal. In many ways, the CAC-EEO report gave credence to the more militant position. By demonstrating that, despite the successes, the school system was still fundamentally segregated, the CAC-EEO report provided evidence for militants to claim that the incremental approach of the liberal-labor-black coalition was a failure. Perhaps the most damaging findings as far as blacks' faith in the coalition was concerned were the revelations about the apprenticeship programs in which the actions of the unions belied their rhetoric. Nevertheless, the militants failed to acknowledge that, during the six years that the coalition had been able to seriously influence school policy, dramatic changes, including the CAC-EEO report itself, had taken place.

Leading the revolt against the black establishment was Rev. Albert Cleage, Jr., a Congregational minister, whom Sidney Fine has described as the "most articulate spokesman among the black militants and the central figure in the development of a 'strident' black nationalism in Detroit during the 1960s." As early as 1962, Cleage's columns in his family-run weekly, the *Illustrated News*, routinely denounced "condescending" white liberals and labeled Remus Robinson and other members of the black establishment as "Uncle Toms" who lacked "Negro self-pride and racial courage." The Sherrill School case brought Cleage to the forefront of the civil rights struggle in education and clearly established his reputation as a dynamic leader.<sup>186</sup>

Cleage chaired the meetings of the Sherrill School Parents Committee, and he used this platform to excoriate the NAACP and other mainstream civil rights groups for failing to back the lawsuit. Cleage claimed that NAACP executive secretary Arthur Johnson had been utterly co-opted by the white power structure and that "the masses of Negro people will not support this kind of selfish leadership." As an alternative to such "conservative" leadership, Cleage, Richard B. Henry, and other militant blacks formed the Group of Advanced Leadership (GOAL) that, among other things, strongly supported the Sherrill parents and pressured the school board to adopt history texts that recognized the contributions blacks have made to American life and culture.<sup>187</sup> In addition to GOAL, the Trade Union Leadership Council, an organization founded to combat job discrimination that was emerging as a major rival of the Detroit NAACP, provided funds for the Sherrill parents.<sup>188</sup>

The Sherrill case dragged on for two more years. It never came to trial, not because of the merits of the case, but because the parents dropped the suit following a major change in the composition of the school board in 1964.<sup>189</sup> Rather than becoming the first major, northern desegregation case

in the country, the Sherrill suit served as a catalyst for the emerging populist trend in educational politics that was affecting black as well as white Detroiters. The Sherrill parents and their supporters had pressed their suit without the blessing or support of established civil rights organizations, much as the white Northwest Parents Committee had ignored established labor, business, and religious leaders when they launched their boycott in 1960.

Significantly, the Sherrill suit was followed by other grass roots protests in the African-American community, notably a campaign against the principal of Balch School and one against overcrowding at Northwestern High School. In each of these incidents, Rev. Albert Cleage, Jr., played an important role. Despite a relatively small following in the black community, by this time, Cleage and his allies were increasingly dominating the debate on educational issues. In doing so, Cleage forced such established civil rights organizations as the NAACP into taking more militant stands. As a consequence, over the next few years educational issues became increasingly polarized along racial lines.<sup>190</sup>

Between 1955 and 1963, the liberal-labor-black coalition had made important strides in the effort to end racially biased policies and practices in the Detroit public schools. Yet, by 1963, the coalition seemed to be in serious trouble due to the disaffection of white, working-class parents opposed to integration and black militants angered over the persistence of segregation. As a consequence of these positions, the politics of education in Detroit entered a period of profound change. Extremists from both sides of the color line were challenging the authority of established leaders. Nowhere were these challenges more apparent than in the campaigns to increase school taxes in 1963 and 1964.

### **Racial Politics and School Finance, 1963–64**

In the early 1960s, educational politics in Detroit were marked by two contradictory trends. On the one hand, the city was one of the most liberal in the nation, a bastion of organized labor and a bulwark of the Democratic party. Such political sentiments, school leaders believed, would translate into strong support for new efforts to improve and expand the schools. On the other hand, by 1963, as the conflicts about boundary changes and busing indicated, some white Detroiters were increasingly resentful of the attention given to black demands and some black Detroiters were furious over the lack of substantive racial change in the school system. Obviously for very different reasons, these individuals were becoming less likely to support school tax



increases or bond issues. In 1963 and 1964, as the school board once again went to voters to seek additional funds, these trends became accentuated. Race was emerging as a key factor in educational politics in Detroit.

In March, 1961, school leaders began planning their campaign to renew the 7.5 mill school tax levy that had been passed in 1959. Their planning, however, was filled with foreboding. Even with the enormous increase of funds from the 1959 millage and the bond victories, school leaders saw serious financial problems on the horizon. Enrollments continued to soar, hitting 294,527 in the fall of 1963, but revenue failed to keep pace with that growth. In 1959, when the tax increase was approved, the board had expected property assessments to rise, thus insuring a steady increase in tax revenue. Instead, assessed valuation and, consequently, school revenue declined. Between 1960 and 1965, Detroit lost 5.7 percent of its assessed valuation, while assessed valuation in the rest of state rose 3.4 percent. As a consequence of the decline, between 1960 and 1966, Detroit lost more than \$40 million in tax revenue. As early as 1963, the school system was running a \$6 million deficit. Some of that lost revenue was made up by federal funds, but the long-term financial prospects of the board were grim.<sup>191</sup>

Other revenue such as state aid did not make up the remaining shortfall. In fact, in the 1962–63 school year, the state provided the Detroit schools with a significantly smaller proportion of its total budget than it had in 1953–54. State and federally mandated expenses, however, such as contributions to the teachers' retirement system and social security, continued to rise. Between 1953–54 and 1962–63, the amount Detroit spent on employee benefits (most of which went to retirement and social security) jumped from \$4.12 million to almost \$12.50 million, accounting for 4.5 percent and 8.6 percent of the total school budgets, respectively. In addition, inflation was once again taking its toll on the budget, with construction costs rising and the purchasing power of teachers' salaries declining.<sup>192</sup>

As a consequence of these developments, early in 1963, the board decided to ask the voters for an additional 5.3 mills on April 1st, when it sought the renewal of the 7.5 mill tax that was due to expire in 1964. In addition to the 12.8 mill proposal, the board also sought approval of a \$90 million bond issue to carry out the second phase of the CAC-recommended building program and eliminate, once and for all, the inadequate housing situation which still found some 65,000 students in substandard buildings or on half-day sessions.<sup>193</sup> Securing these funds, however, proved to be far more difficult in 1963 than in 1959 because of several new factors that were shaping educational politics in the Motor City: increasing tension about racial

issues in education, the shift in the racial balance of the schools, and the erosion of the political power of established educational interest groups. In addition, as the board wrestled with these financial problems, the DFT reemerged as a powerful, aggressive force in school politics, a development that placed even greater strain on the board as it attempted to get its financial house in order.

Initially, the board had every reason to be confident of the outcome of the election. All of the major interest groups, including the Board of Commerce, the Wayne County AFL-CIO, the UAW, the NAACP, and the Urban League, as well as both the daily newspapers, strongly endorsed the tax increase and the bond issue. In an impassioned front-page editorial that appeared just before the election, the *Labor News* stated that, as far as the schools were concerned, April 1st was the “Most Crucial Date in Detroit History.”<sup>194</sup> Given the fact that this alignment of interest groups had proven to be unbeatable in the past, school leaders paid scant attention to the opponents of the proposals who were appearing in several sections of the city. Yet, the grass roots rumblings among the white working class that had manifested themselves in the Northwest Parents Committee and the rising prominence of black nationalists such as Cleage should not have been ignored.

Opposition to the tax increases came from these two quite different sources: voters in the predominantly white wards in the outlying parts of the city and black nationalists from the inner city. A random survey of generally white westside voters taken about five weeks before the election found heavy opposition to the millage increase and the bond issue. People gave many reasons for their opposition; dismay at the prospect of a large tax hike was high on the list. But the one reason for opposing the propositions that received the most attention was the refusal of many white voters to increase their taxes to pay for schools in black neighborhoods. In a postelection editorial, the *Detroit News* declared that throughout the campaign, the paper had received many letters expressing the blunt, racist sentiment, “I’m not going to vote money for Negro schools.” The possibility that the board might use the new tax revenue to promote integration drew an even more vicious response. As a letter quoted in the *Michigan Chronicle* put it, “If you think we’re going to vote the Board of Education more money to ship a lot more niggers into white schools, you’re nuts.”<sup>195</sup>

The second source of opposition to the proposals came from black nationalists led by Albert Cleage, Jr., and GOAL. They argued that despite solid black support for past tax increases, schools in black neighborhoods

had received the least amount of benefit from the additional funds. George Crockett, one of the attorneys for the Sherrill parents, strongly opposed the millage, noting that the school board had used additional funds to maintain segregation in the past. Cleage argued that “a vote against the millage will constitute an effective protest against the pattern of racial segregation and discrimination in our Detroit public schools and will force the Board and the Superintendent to take immediate steps to equalize educational opportunity.” Prior to the election, Cleage’s *Illustrated News* summed up the militants’ position succinctly, declaring that “Selling millage to the Negro community will be as hard as selling bleaching cream to Malcolm X.”<sup>196</sup>

In the end, however, it was primarily the white opposition to the proposals that determined the outcome of the April 1 millage and bond issue elections. Both proposals went down to staggering defeat, getting only 39 and 33 percent of the vote, respectively. Most of the opposition came from the outlying white wards. Despite the stand taken by Cleage and his supporters, both propositions received majorities in the predominantly black sections of the city, although black voters did not turn out in large numbers to support the measures. Board president William Merrifield declared that the election was a “catastrophe.” The failure to renew the 7.5 mill school tax meant that, in June, 1964, the school system would lose about \$42 million annually, almost one-third of its budget.<sup>197</sup>

Over the next few months, school leaders scrambled desperately to devise plans, such as shifting to a twelve-month school year, hoping to avert the total financial collapse of the school system.<sup>198</sup> Ultimately, however, they realized that the only “alternative to disaster,” as the *News* put it, would have to be a special millage election. In August, the board decided to forgo any attempt to increase revenue or issue bonds and simply placed a ten-year, 7.5 mill renewal on the November ballot.<sup>199</sup>

With school leaders claiming that the very survival of public education in Detroit was hanging in the balance, all major interest groups, including the Archdiocese of Detroit, the Democratic and Republican parties, and even the Detroit Real Estate Board, redoubled their efforts to pass the proposal. No group gave the renewal more solid support than the Board of Commerce, which, by 1963, had made a complete about-face in its attitude on school taxes. Fearing the effects of the utter collapse of the school system on the economic viability of the city, the business leaders gave unqualified support to the proposal. The Wayne County AFL-CIO and the UAW also strongly supported the proposition.<sup>200</sup>

Opposition to the renewal again emerged in predominantly white sec-

tions of town, led by the Greater Detroit Homeowners Council. In addition, the *Redford Record* denounced the millage proposal, claiming that the money would be used to promote integration rather than improve educational quality. On the other side of the color line, Cleage and the *Illustrated News* again urged blacks to oppose the renewal, arguing that “we voted for millage once and got 2 million dollars worth of segregation.”<sup>201</sup>

This time, however, the opposition failed to move the voters. Proponents of the measure vigorously and successfully argued that the renewal was crucial to the survival of the schools and noted that the proposal would not increase taxes but would merely keep them at the same level they had been for the past five years. These arguments were convincing. The proposal passed with about 63 percent of the vote. Nevertheless, the racial divisions that appeared in the April vote surfaced again in November. Two predominantly white wards in the northeast section of the city were the only sections of the city to vote against the proposition.<sup>202</sup>

The 7.5 mill renewal kept the school system operating, but with no possibility of expanding or improving public education in the city. The second phase of the CAC-recommended building program, for example, was put on hold until the board felt it could again go to the voters to support a bond issue. In the interim, a new problem arose. Detroit’s teachers began clamoring for pay raises as their salaries fell further behind those in the suburbs.<sup>203</sup> Faced once more with the twin problems of providing enough buildings and adequately paying teachers, the board kicked off a campaign in August, 1964, to win voter approval of a \$75 million bond issue for construction. Once again, all the major interest groups, including the AFL-CIO and the Board of Commerce, supported the campaign. Yet this time, the proponents did not succeed. On September 1, voters defeated this effort to get more money for school construction by a substantial margin. At the same time, two-thirds of all school bond proposals were passing across Michigan, while 70 percent of all bond proposals were approved across the nation. The growing racial polarization in the city was unquestionably compounding the problem of raising adequate revenue for the schools.<sup>204</sup>

The September school bond election was the first in which the majority of the students in the Detroit system were black, while the majority of the voters in the city were white. The political tension that this demographic shift created did not bode well for the financial health of the schools. The proposition lost by over 19,000 votes, most of which were cast in the white northeast and northwest sections of the city. Indeed, almost half of all the no votes came from the predominantly white twenty-second ward, the Redford/Bright-

moor area, in the northwest section of the city. A follow-up study of 118 “indicator” precincts confirmed that voters had essentially split along racial lines, with white opponents to the measure turning out in substantially larger numbers than black supporters of the proposal.<sup>205</sup> The only positive outcome of this election was that it spurred the state legislature into beginning work on approving bonding authority for the school system. This authority would enable the board to issue bonds equal to 2 percent of assessed valuation without going to the voters, a power that every other large school district in the state had had for many years. On the negative side, from this point on it was clear that race would play a central role in the struggle to adequately fund the public schools. Further polarization seemed inevitable.<sup>206</sup>

In many ways, the school tax and bond elections of 1963 and 1964 mark the beginning of an important transition in the political history of the school system. Central to this change were the voting patterns of white, largely working-class Detroiters, who exhibited two distinct voting tendencies throughout the early 1960s. In 1960 and 1961, large numbers of white Detroiters backed two prominent liberal Democrats—John Kennedy and Jerome Cavanagh. The fact that both men were Catholic undoubtedly added to their popularity among the large number of white, Catholic Detroiters. Indeed, one researcher argued that the substantial Catholic majorities piled up by John Kennedy in Detroit signaled that the New Deal coalition was “reassembling and revitalizing” in the Motor City.<sup>207</sup> Yet at the same time, another trend, quite contradictory to the first, was emerging in the voting patterns of white Detroiters in school tax elections. As early as the 1957 millage defeat, there were indications that Detroiters were voting along racial lines, with blacks supporting higher school taxes and whites opposing them.<sup>208</sup> The 1959 victories ran counter to that pattern, but it reemerged in April, 1963, and again in September, 1964. These elections provide evidence that large numbers of white, working-class voters, particularly Catholics, were abandoning the liberal-labor-black educational coalition and were the first glimmers of what would come to be known as white “backlash” against school integration, against the Democratic party, and against such liberal union leaders as Walter Reuther.<sup>209</sup>

In addition, the stand taken by militant members of the black community on the millage and bond issues contributed to the importance of these elections in changing the nature of school politics in Detroit. While Cleage and his supporters failed to persuade a majority of black voters to side with them against the measures, their militant stand reflected a growing mood of

anger and impatience with the established black and white liberal leadership in the city over the slow pace of change in the school system.

Compounding these growing political and financial problems was the reemergence of the DFT as a major player in school politics. This political resurrection began in 1960 with the election of Mary Ellen Riordan as president of the union. A tough, dedicated advocate for the teachers, Riordan forced the union to shake off the lethargy that settled over it in the 1950s due, in large part, to the Hutchinson Act.<sup>210</sup> The DFT initially focused on winning a substantial salary increase for Detroit's teachers, whose competitive salary advantage with suburban teachers had totally disappeared in the late 1950s. By 1963–64, the maximum salary for Detroit teachers with a master's degree had dropped from the twenty-first highest in the state to the forty-sixth highest. Most of the school systems that surpassed Detroit were in the surrounding suburbs. In addition to agitating for higher salaries, the union broadened its demands to include such emotionally charged issues as better protection for teachers in the increasingly violence-prone schools.<sup>211</sup>

The change in leadership and the immediate problems of deteriorating salaries and working conditions spurred the resurgence of the DFT, but the main catalyst for renewed militance in the DFT was the victory of New York City's United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in a collective bargaining election in December, 1961. The UAW had strongly supported the UFT organizing campaign and the *Detroit Labor News* gave the election front-page coverage. Detroit teachers clearly recognized the significance of the UFT election, which was held after a one-day protest strike in the very state whose anti-public employee strike bill had served as a model for Michigan's Hutchinson Act.<sup>212</sup> Until then, the failure to repeal the Hutchinson Act was one of the most important political setbacks that organized labor suffered in Michigan during the 1950s.<sup>213</sup> The UFT victory, however, seemed to say that the Hutchinson Act was moot. In 1962, with strong support from Walter Reuther, the UAW, and the Wayne County AFL-CIO, the DFT began an intense campaign to force the board to agree to a bargaining election.<sup>214</sup>

What followed were a series of events remarkably similar to those that had taken place in the salary dispute of 1947. In May, 1963, the DFT presented the board with petitions, signed by approximately 70 percent of the Detroit teachers, demanding a bargaining election. In December, angry over the failure of the board to act on the petitions, an estimated 3,000 DFT members carried picket signs, surrounded the board of education headquarters, and demanded a bargaining election.<sup>215</sup> The board, however, rebuffed

the teachers once again on the grounds that such an election was illegal. "We want an election and a contract," Riordan declared in response. "Unless we gain these fundamental rights, a strike appears inevitable." On February 27, the DFT members carried that threat one step further and voted to strike by a six-to-one margin. Soon after, the Wayne County AFL-CIO executive committee voted unanimously to support the teachers' union.<sup>216</sup>

In the interim, the board received an opinion from the Michigan attorney general approving the collective bargaining election. Facing enormous pressure from organized labor and with no legal justification to deny the election, the board capitulated.<sup>217</sup> Throughout March and April, the DFT and DEA, the two organizations vying to represent the teachers, waged an angry war of words. The results of the election were, however, a foregone conclusion for three reasons. First, in a union town such as Detroit, the DFT had an enormous advantage over the DEA, which was not affiliated with organized labor. Second, due to events in the 1930s and 1940s, more teachers trusted the DFT as an effective advocate with such proven successes as the restoration of the 1932 salary cut and gaining the 1947 salary increase. Third, for all its appeals to "professionalism," the DEA could not shake the label of being a "company union," a charge the DFT had been making for almost thirty years. In the end, the DFT trounced the DEA, winning almost 60 percent of the total vote.<sup>218</sup> It was a tremendous victory for organized labor, but it could not have come at a worse time for the school board. Just as the school leaders were fighting an uphill battle to get the restive and divided electorate to vote more money for the schools, the DFT emerged as a powerful force that would again play an important role in deciding how new money would be spent.

By mid-1964, the crises of the preceding eighteen months began to take their toll on the members of the school board, particularly the leader of the liberal faction on the board, Leonard Kasle. Despite his strong ties to the liberal community, Kasle was under fire from organized labor for his failure to expedite collective bargaining with the teachers and from civil rights groups for moving too slowly on their demands.<sup>219</sup> In addition, relations between Kasle and Samuel Brownell were becoming increasingly strained. Kasle publicly clashed with Brownell in September, 1963, over the issue of racial discrimination in teacher assignments with Kasle threatening to resign as president of the board if the superintendent did not move more forcefully on that matter. In February, 1964, amid another controversy with Brownell, Kasle, William Merrifield, and Roy Stephens, Jr., all announced that they would not seek reelection to the board. Four months later, in yet one more

clash with Brownell, Kastle angrily resigned as president, a last symbolic gesture by a man who was clearly weary of the struggle.<sup>220</sup>

Recognizing another opportunity to dramatically influence the character of the board, leaders of the liberal-labor-black coalition geared up to replace the three resigning members with another group of individuals even more strongly tied to organized labor and civil rights groups. Walter Reuther persuaded his longtime associate, attorney A. L. Zwerdling, to lead the ticket. Joining Zwerdling were Rev. Darneau Stewart, a black minister, and Peter Grylls, an executive at Michigan Bell. Running as a slate, the three received strong backing from the AFL-CIO, the Democratic party, SOS, the DFT, and civil rights groups. The Board of Commerce, on the other hand, took no position on the election, and the Citizens League labeled all three candidates “qualified.”<sup>221</sup>

Besides the strong backing from key labor and civil rights organizations and virtually no opposition from major conservative groups, the slate was aided by two fortuitous developments. First, a strike against the daily newspapers during the campaign gave the liberal candidates a marked advantage over their less well known and well connected opponents. The *Labor News*, for example, which was published during the strike, gave the liberal slate a great deal of publicity while virtually ignoring the other candidates. Second, the newly revised Michigan constitution shifted school board elections from April to November. As it turned out, the first November school board election in Detroit coincided with the presidential race between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater. Given the enormous numbers of liberal, labor, and black voters who turned out for Johnson, it was not at all surprising that the entire school board slate swept to victory. Joining Remus Robinson, these new members formed the most solid liberal majority in the history of the school board. The *Michigan Chronicle* hailed their election as “substantial evidence of the effectiveness of a genuine effort on the part of a liberal, labor, church, Negro coalition.”<sup>222</sup> The three new members took office on July 1, 1965. After almost four decades of struggle, organized labor and its liberal allies had finally captured the school board.

### Conclusion

From 1950 to 1964, the Detroit public schools experienced several profound changes. Far from being a period of “business as usual” or “holding the line,” these years mark the time when the liberal-labor-black coalition in Detroit emerged as *the* major force in educational politics in the Motor City.<sup>223</sup> This



rise to power occurred despite such events as the red scare and conservative criticism of the deteriorating quality of the school program. The triumph of the coalition, however, was not without irony or surprise.

In the early 1950s, the essential outlines of school politics in Detroit still resembled those of the 1930s. Just as they had for two decades, labor and business organizations continued to clash about school board candidates and the level of educational expenditures. Yet, by 1955, a number of crises coalesced to utterly change these traditional patterns of political conflict. Foremost among these crises was the enormous financial problems facing the school system due to almost twenty years of neglect and the tidal wave of baby boomers. In addition to these problems, the increasingly powerful African-American community began aggressively demanding equal educational opportunities for their children. As Detroiters turned to liberal leaders and ideas to solve all these problems, the political balance of power shifted to the liberal-labor-black coalition. Ironically, however, after the triumph of the liberal school board candidates in the mid-1950s, victories built largely upon appeals to class interests, the basis of school politics in the Motor City began to shift, with race supplanting class as the pivotal feature in educational debates and decisions.

Several factors combined to cause this important change in the basis of school politics. The profound demographic transformation of the city that led to African-American students becoming the majority in the Detroit schools in 1963 certainly was at the heart of this change in the nature of educational politics in Detroit. In addition, the burgeoning civil rights movement focused attention on the separate and unequal educational opportunities in the urban North as well as in the rural South. Black leaders in Detroit were quick to sound that theme and, allied with white liberals and labor leaders, they forced school officials to confront the blatant discrimination that existed in the school system.

The election of the SOS-backed school board candidates in 1955 and the appointment of Samuel Brownell as superintendent in 1956 marked the beginning of dramatic changes in terms of hiring more black teachers, addressing the educational problems of black children, and spending large sums of money for the construction of new buildings in predominantly black neighborhoods. The greater equalization of resources implied by these developments, however, did not really begin until the early 1960s, after the funds from the 1959 millage and bond issues began to flow. In other words, in terms of resources, especially in terms of funds spent on school buildings,

Detroit was clearly operating a separate and unequal school system as late as 1962. The massive building campaign in the early 1960s brought some parity in terms of facilities to black students. Nevertheless, the overall picture in Detroit from the Great Depression to the 1960s was one of large-scale and persistent racial inequality in school construction and renovation.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of educational inequality in Detroit, however, was largely unrelated to the allocation of resources. Clearly, the quality and availability of the programs in black and white schools was unequal. In predominantly black schools, the dilution of the curriculum proceeded at a faster pace and with a broader stroke than in white schools. Black high school students were channeled more frequently than whites into the insubstantial general track and they were virtually denied apprenticeship opportunities in the most promising vocational programs. Nowhere was the failure to provide equal educational opportunity more pronounced than in these areas.

Unfortunately, by the time leading Detroiters became concerned enough to address these inequalities, the mood of important segments of the Detroit electorate began to change. Precipitating this shift were controversies about school boundaries or, more precisely, school integration. Many white Detroiters vehemently opposed integration. Fearful that racial changes were occurring too swiftly and, after 1963, unwilling to provide financial support for a majority black school system, they began voting heavily against millage and bond issues. On the other side of the color line, some blacks, angry over what they perceived to be the slow pace of change within the system, also opposed increased funding for the schools, arguing that new funds would merely shore up an already segregated system.

In many ways, the April, 1963, and September, 1964, elections were as important to the history of the Detroit public schools as was the formation of the Stone Committee during the Great Depression. These elections signaled the beginning of a sea change in educational politics in the Motor City. Just as the politics of educational retrenchment in the 1930s came to resemble the larger political developments in the nation, so the racial politics of education in the early 1960s would come to resemble the larger political patterns emerging in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1930s, the business community abandoned its commitment to expanding and improving the Detroit schools. Similarly, during the racial struggles of the 1960s and early 1970s, large numbers of the white working class and a small but vocal segment of the black community would essentially do the same.