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The Challenge to Create a “Community of Believers”: Civil Rights Superintendent Alonzo Crim and Atlanta’s School Desegregation Compromise

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Dr. Alonzo Crim was the first African American Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools (APS). He served in that role for fifteen years, from 1973 to 1988, during a tumultuous time in U. S. educational history. These were the post-*Brown* years, when court-ordered desegregation mandates led to widespread busing, the creation of magnet schools, and the implementation of alternative means of promoting racial integration.¹ Nationwide, the court mandates were met with acts of resistance—including in Atlanta, despite its historic role in the U. S. civil rights movement. Ebenezer Baptist Church (where Martin Luther King Sr. and Jr. preached) cast a tall shadow over a city where many public school educators and students fled to the suburbs to escape integration. Amid these challenges, the APS school board hired Alonzo Crim as the system’s new leader.

Crim came to Atlanta with an impressive resume, despite humble origins. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Roosevelt College in Chicago and began his career as a teacher in Chicago Public Schools. Crim rose through the ranks in that system by becoming an elementary school principal, high school principal, and district superintendent. In 1969, he earned an education doctorate from Harvard University and, shortly thereafter, accept-

ed the superintendency of the Compton School District in California.² In 1973, APS leaders decided the city needed a new and dynamic African American leader to stabilize the struggling system. They found one in Crim.

In our research, we sought to identify the challenges and triumphs of Crim's tenure in APS by situating his superintendency within national issues of the 1970s and 1980s.³ To fully understand his significance as superintendent, we had to examine his failures as well as his successes. We found that, despite the important role he played in Atlanta during the critical post-*Brown* years, there is very little academic literature on him. There is, however, an abundance of literature in the field of African American studies, and especially on African American education.⁴ Consider, for example, detailed studies of emancipation and education during Reconstruction,⁵ works on black teachers' efforts in Jim Crow era segregated schools,⁶ and other works that have examined civic activism⁷ and urban education in the African American community.⁸ Yet fewer books exist on African American educational leaders.

Like Crim, early African American educators such as Horace Mann Bond, Deborah P. Wolfe, Ulysses Byas, and Benjamin E. Mays sought to improve education for African American students.⁹ In the early 1970s, African American superintendents dramatically increased in number, with evidence of this growth underscored by the establishment of the National Alliance of Black School Educators.¹⁰ Nevertheless, very few works describe the leadership of long-lasting African American superintendents. No book-length biography of Alonzo Crim is extant, nor are there scholarly articles about his career. Yet, he was able to maintain a long, fifteen-year tenure at the helm of APS. Such longevity prompts scholarly interest in his leadership.

As two white scholars who seek to study and analyze an African American subject, several concerns arise. Although historians continually seek objectivity, we engage in this project with a recognition of our own subjectivities that—no matter what precautions we may take—might never be overcome. To provide perspective, we have interviewed Crim's friends and family, not to draw conclusions about his personal life, but to understand the significance of his tenure in APS.¹¹ We hope our work will inspire future scholars to research the life and work of Alonzo Crim and other African American educational leaders. Such research contributes to an understanding of a poignant and defining moment in southern public school history, and the role that Crim and other educators played in it.

Paving the Road to Atlanta Public Schools

Alonzo A. Crim was born in Chicago, Illinois on October 1, 1928, the son of George Crim and Hazel Howard.¹² Crim's upbringing shaped his belief in the power of the community to educate children. As his parents were not

allowed many educational opportunities, Crim stated later in life that it was through his community of supporters that he was able to come to value the importance of education.¹³ Beginning work at eight years old as a newspaper delivery boy, he was the product of the Depression and grew up in modest circumstances. By twelve he became a stock boy in a Chicago warehouse, and was able to give half his salary to his parents and keep the remaining half for his personal expenses. Although he was an African American male and opportunities were limited, his parents believed that he had the potential to attend college. Crim's involvement in the YMCA further reinforced his confidence in his ability. Additionally, his work with the Hull House settlements, Lincoln Center, and the Henry Booth House influenced his desire to dedicate his life's work in service to other people.¹⁴

Crim initially attended George Williams College, but completed his Bachelor of Arts degree at Roosevelt College in 1950.¹⁵ He began his teaching career at Jacob Riis Elementary School in Chicago during 1954, the year of the *Brown* decision. Crim worked at this racially mixed school for nine years and reported he learned from his Riis colleagues (predominantly single, white females) how to reach more of his students, to meet "the challenge of educating all God's children."¹⁶

Crim's experience at Riis also prepared him for graduate work at the University of Chicago where two professors, John Goodlad and Allison Davis, encouraged him to refine his teaching. Goodlad believed in community involvement to change the schools that currently exist. His unabashed optimism would influence Crim's own leadership practices later in his life. Crim earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of Chicago in 1958. In 1961 (the year that Atlanta schools officially desegregated) he was one of only five African Americans to pass the Chicago principal examination.¹⁷ He became the principal of Whittier Elementary School, which had an all-white, predominantly Slavic student body. He made frequent classroom visits to establish a rapport with teachers to work together in partnership; Crim also believed in frequent and significant communication between parents, teachers, and principals as being essential to a school's success.¹⁸

When offered the chance to develop a school from the ground up for illiterate adults, Crim could not resist the opportunity and in 1963 became the principal of Chicago's Adult Education Center.¹⁹ The success of the center led him to testify at a hearing of the Health, Education, and Welfare Committee chaired by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell in Washington, DC. This experience helped Crim realize the importance of politics in American education, an understanding that would serve him well in his future career.

Crim then accepted a position as principal of Wendell Phillips High School. It was one of Chicago's first African American high schools and had

a long tradition of excellence. Like many urban public schools, Wendell Phillips faced its share of problems: a large student body of 4,000 teenagers (most of whom lived in housing projects), an eighty percent attendance rate, and a pressing dropout problem. Crim immediately addressed these challenges, organizing the teachers in teams to help make the school a safe and welcoming environment.²⁰

Crim enjoyed Wendell Phillips High School but believed he needed to challenge his mind against the best students in the United States. He enrolled in the Harvard Graduate School of Education where he earned an Ed.D. in 1969.²¹ He reported that his years at Harvard, guided by his advisor Herold V. Hunt, helped him develop faith in his abilities to become a superintendent, and also aided him in being able to handle the hurt and suspicion of racism. During his graduate work at Harvard, Crim was promoted to be a district superintendent in Chicago. In 1970, he became superintendent of Compton, California High School District, which later merged with the elementary schools to become the Compton Unified School District.²²

Compton presented significant challenges that Crim welcomed. Compton is contiguous to Los Angeles' Watts district, which in 1968 had experienced race riots that garnered national attention. Its population was predominantly African American and Hispanic. When the Black Panthers threatened to take over Compton High School, Crim invited the group to his office for a discussion. The result of this meeting was an agreement that the student body could vote on whether or not they wanted the Black Panthers on campus. By a 3-1 ratio, the students voted the Black Panthers off campus. Through measures such as meetings and voting, Crim brought community support to the district and helped to improve conditions in the schools.²³ His leadership reflected a desire for the community to be active and committed stakeholders in its school system. By providing the students with agency he allowed democracy to strengthen his own authority, thus demonstrating how respect is to be earned by the school community, and not forcibly demanded.

When Crim was invited to interview for superintendent of APS, it was an opportunity he could not refuse. He noted in 1973 that he had "always been of the opinion that Atlanta is in the vanguard of solving some of the social problems" that plagued the nation's school systems.²⁴ As the center of the civil rights movement and the home to the Atlanta University Center, Crim regarded the Atlanta superintendency as an attractive prospect for students, the city, and his career.

Historical Overview of Segregation and Integration in Atlanta

Atlanta was shaped by a long and troubled history of race relations.



Henry Grady (1850-1889), editor of the Atlanta Constitution and political leader of the city, viewed Atlanta as capital of the "New South"—a segregated but sophisticated urban capital. Modern understandings of segregation developed during Atlanta's rapid industrialization (and accompanying railroad expansion) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The city, a transportation hub, enacted laws to clearly divide the races in the close quarters created by new public transportation.²⁵ Under Atlanta's thin veil of sophistication brewed a cauldron of racial injustice and strife, a situation that would reach its boiling point during race riots in 1906 when bodies of slain African American citizens were placed under the statue of Henry Grady to display some Atlantans' contempt for his vision of the "New South."²⁶

The city's segregated school system began in 1872 when missionary-led elementary schools first opened their doors to African American children. Many schools opened and closed in the period following the Civil War, but it was not until 1924 that the founding of Booker T. Washington High School gave African American Atlantans the means to pursue a secondary education. The school opened as a part of political compromise, and it would remain the only African American high school until 1947.²⁷ Inequality was expected for African American Atlantans; underfunded and overcrowded schools (coupled with job and housing discrimination) remained the status quo for many years to come.

In 1958, in *Vivian Calhoun vs. A. C. Latimer*, the court found APS to be segregated, and ruled the schools must desegregate within a reasonable time period.²⁸ As in the rest of the country, desegregation occurred at a sluggish rate during this period; of the 100,000 students in APS in the 1961-1962 school year, nine African American students attended four predominantly white schools. The NAACP became increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of desegregation in Atlanta, and pressure continued to mount for the system to comply with the court mandate. Desegregation implementation increased to two grade levels per year (as opposed to one). In 1965 the district court ruled that Atlanta's existing desegregation plans had not sufficiently integrated the city's African American and white school-aged children.²⁹ Yet, Atlanta's demographics were changing, and APS was becoming a majority African American system. The 1970 census revealed the population of Atlanta had changed from being majority white in 1960, to majority African American in 1970. The total white population had decreased by more than 60,000, while the African American population had increased by over 68,000 residents.³⁰ Between 1965 and 1972, APS saw its white student population drop from almost 53,000 to 28,000.³¹

Atlanta's reputation suffered in the early 1970s, despite a carefully crafted image consistent with Mayor William B. Hartsfield's slogan that it was a "city too busy to hate."³² It had become clear to many that racism and dis-

crimination were very much imbedded in Atlanta's social fabric. These problems would soon manifest themselves as economic failures if the city's citizens did not adopt a new plan of action, especially as regards its public schools.

As early as 1968, the Supreme Court case of *Green vs. New Kent* had determined that the Freedom of Choice integration programs (such as those used in Atlanta) were not effective means of adequately complying with desegregation mandates. This brought the then-APS superintendent John Leston under increased scrutiny.³³ When he announced his intention to retire, APS began a nationwide search for a new chief school executive—one who could help to unify the increasingly fragmented school system, community, and commercial enterprises of Atlanta.³⁴

The Compromise of 1973

Atlanta had long placed the needs of the business community at the forefront of political concerns. In the 1920s and 1930s, a myriad of Atlanta businessmen had acted as commercial and political cheerleaders for the city. Following in the footsteps of Henry Grady's "New South," men such as Louie Newton and Ivan Allen Senior coined phrases like the "Atlanta Spirit" and the "Forward Atlanta Movement" that sought to dispel allegations that the city was a backward and stagnant southern town. They wanted to replace these stereotypes with the image of a thriving southern metropolis that had much to offer northern and foreign businesses. The lessons taught by the progressive Atlantian leaders of the first half of the twentieth century continued to hold significance in the later half of the twentieth century, as well.³⁵

Despite these efforts, discrimination did not dissipate within Atlanta, and meaningful change was as elusive as ever. Fears of racial violence, acceleration of white flight, and the denigration of "New South" proponents finally pushed citizens and business leaders to attempt to reach a compromise with civil rights leaders to substantially integrate APS. In 1973, the Action Forum, a group of white- and black- owned businesses, helped to create an environment that led to the school board's acceptance of a compromise agreement. Underpinning the discussion was a desire on both sides of the color line to limit cross-town busing for fear it would only accelerate white flight and the growth of private schools. Additionally, both sides wanted to avoid the racial violence that had plagued other southern cities such as Little Rock and Birmingham.³⁶

White leaders who were parties to the compromise discussions (such as Coca-Cola CEO Robert Woodruff and former Atlanta mayors William B. Hartsfield and Ivan Allen, Jr.) yielded to some requests of the civil rights leaders.³⁷ However, the compromise that was reached in 1973 angered civil

rights leaders as much as it satisfied them. *The New York Times* reported that the Compromise of 1973, as it was called, signified that Atlanta had accepted the minimum desegregation of students for the maximum integration of administrators.³⁸

Under the compromise, Atlanta's superintendent would be African American; fifty percent of the APS administrators would also be African American, including those in higher level administrative positions. This degree of administrative integration was not paralleled at the school level for teachers and students. The compromise called for the redrawing of attendance zones with only 4,800 of APS's 92,000 students to be bused in a majority-to-minority transfer program.³⁹ While this number seems staggeringly low, the enrollment decline among white students did not leave much room for integration via cross-town busing. With a student population that approximated eighty percent African American and twenty percent Caucasian during the 1972-1973 school year, the negotiations were limited by the small number of whites still left within the school system.⁴⁰ Since one of the goals of the compromise was to pull Caucasian students away from the burgeoning private schools and suburbs and return them to APS, the compromise sanctioned the creation of magnet schools throughout the district.⁴¹

The actions by the school board and Action Forum drew the notice of civil rights leaders, both locally and nationally. Although the compromise did much to placate various stakeholder groups in Atlanta, many local community activists and other civil rights leaders such as Reverend Ralph Abernathy opposed the plan. While the compromise found support from future Atlanta mayor Andrew Young and former Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays, their acceptance was not enough to satisfy the NAACP,⁴² whose leadership felt the plan did not do justice to the long and intense struggle for desegregation through court cases. Roy Wilkins and Bishop Steven Spottswood of the national NAACP leadership were so infuriated with the compromise that they suspended the Atlanta members of the NAACP for their support of the agreement.⁴³

The search for a new APS superintendent resulted in the vetting of many prominent African American educators. Two names quickly came to the fore: Alonzo Crim of Compton, California and Johnnie Jones of Miami-Dade, Florida.⁴⁴ While the search for the ideal candidate was held in closed door meetings, both Crim and Jones participated in public meetings where citizens were able to question them for up to two hours concerning their ideas and strategies for the improvement of APS. After the public hearings were complete, the school board made a unanimous decision in support of Crim.⁴⁵

Crim's credentials, experience with a majority-African American school system, and attention to community stakeholders appeared to offer the combination needed to guide Atlanta's troubled school system. His expressed

desire to be attentive to all members of the community helped to gain the support of business leaders. They noted with interest Crim's comment that access to all of Atlanta's governmental and industrial resources provided APS with the ideal opportunity "to think beyond the closed classroom" as there is such "a rich classroom" in "Atlanta."⁴⁶ Although the Compromise of 1973 may have troubled many civil rights leaders, Crim declared that he would do everything he could to engage all citizens of Atlanta in the public schools. An astute political player, he realized that to enhance educational opportunities for African American students, he needed to improve educational opportunities for every student in the city.

APS Superintendency, 1973-1988

Crim began his leadership of APS by going straight to work in calming racial tensions and engaging community stakeholders in the school system. APS stabilized during the Crim superintendency, even though white flight, school closings, and teacher strikes all occurred in his administration. Crim had critics, some of whom felt he was indecisive, and others who said he was too decisive. Yet, when the dust settled, student achievement and attendance improved and community involvement was at an all-time high. Crim also gained national and international recognition by participating in committees and panels where he offered insight on U. S. public education.

Crim's Arrival

When Crim arrived in Atlanta, he faced a citizenry that generally favored a change in the superintendent's office. Local newspapers were filled with welcoming remarks and coverage of Crim's initial meetings. African American newspaper articles cited how Atlantans were "pleased" with the new superintendent and positively euphoric about his "excellent credentials" and "enthusiasm."⁴⁷ Unlike his predecessor, Crim welcomed the press and viewed their interest in him and the school system as an additional opportunity to reach out to the community. He would need all the support that he could muster. After years of legal disputes that marked his predecessor's tenure, Crim hoped to change the focus away from integration and toward an interest in the quality of the education APS students received.⁴⁸ Yet, even before he moved to Atlanta he faced tough questions from *Atlanta Constitution* education reporter Steve Stewart.⁴⁹ Stewart pointedly asked about the future of whites in the APS administration given the compromise plan, which required Crim to increase the number of African American administrators in the system. Crim diplomatically responded that both competent whites and competent blacks would have a great future in APS. The

reporter also asked what Crim would do to stop white flight from the school system. Crim stated that he believed providing a quality education would help stabilize Atlanta's schools, noting that "[W]e want to improve the quality of life in the total community where people see Atlanta as a desirable place to live and as a place that they want to send their children to school... [W]e seek to develop such a school program that those who left will want to return."⁵⁰ Yet Crim continued to face questions about how he would handle the problem of white flight well into the early part of his administration in Atlanta.

Crim clearly understood the weight of his responsibility as the first African American superintendent, as he told a newspaper reporter that such a role carried an "extra challenge."⁵¹ He knew he was a role model, not only for African American educators, but for the entire African American community. He had only recently arrived in Atlanta when a close friend (Marcus Foster, an African American superintendent in Oakland, California) was slain after leaving his office.⁵² The murder must have been alarming to Crim, and a not-so-subtle reminder of the dangerous consequences that racial violence can bring. Perhaps the event made him even more cognizant of the need for local community support. To Crim, this meant having parent and student participation in school decisions and policies.

Crim's decision to involve the community in educational affairs was such a drastic change from prior administrations that the local newspaper called it "close to preaching heresy."⁵³ Crim's approach was in part a tactical maneuver that could bring widespread cooperation after years of disputes. He noted, "I do things by design...I'm responsible for putting things together that will affect a lot of people and that's a heavy responsibility. I don't want to be capricious in my decision making."⁵⁴ One of the first decisions Crim made as superintendent was to orchestrate the first-ever convocation of all APS employees (teachers, principals, maintenance workers, administrative staff) at the beginning of the school year. The meeting was held in the Alexander Memorial Coliseum to accommodate all personnel.⁵⁵ Crim also addressed community concerns at many "town hall" meetings that fostered communication with constituencies and gathered support for APS policies.

Crim Challenged

Crim faced several important issues early in his tenure as superintendent. After the initial honeymoon period, he traveled a rocky road in his first two years. Crim believed more attention needed to be directed to educational successes than failures,⁵⁶ noting that "we're constantly under a microscope...it's an uphill struggle against the attitude that anything predominantly black is bad."⁵⁷ Nonetheless, APS faced several challenges. One issue

of grave concern was the number of students who used illegal drugs. When a 14-year-old student was shot and killed after inhaling toxins, Crim made a public plea that “we can at least do our part in controlling these materials to minors” and asked storeowners to prohibit the sale of chemicals, such as glue and paint, to young people.⁵⁸ Another concern was the academic performance of students, particularly in math and reading. Atlanta school children’s scores came under intense criticism because they had fallen significantly behind many schools in the state, with only fifteen percent of APS graduates continuing on to college.⁵⁹ Issues of corporal punishment also came before the school board. In direct contrast with several board members who supported corporal punishment, Crim opposed spanking, using a strap, or other means of bodily harm, preferring instead to appeal to students’ minds.⁶⁰ Yet many Atlantans disagreed with his stance. Board of Education member Bill VanLandingham stated, “If my kids act up and refuse to mind, I want their bottoms spanked,” an opinion that corresponded with Georgia state law.⁶¹

By March 1974, Crim faced open public criticism.⁶² The nine member, predominantly African American Board of Education complained that it was not being informed of the superintendent’s administrative decisions. June Cofer, a white veteran board member, suggested that perhaps Crim was trying to please too many people. Another contentious issue occurred when some (mostly white) parents initiated the creation of the system’s first open—or unstructured—school, reflecting a 1960s innovation that traditionalists criticized in the 1970s. Board members suspected the parents’ support of the open school was a means of avoiding busing.⁶³ Crim also faced opposition when Julie Sherman—administrative aide to Maynard Jackson, Atlanta’s first African American mayor—was granted a prohibited “out of zone” transfer for her children. Crim noted he regretted the transfer but wished board members would spend their energies on “more serious problems,” which further angered some board members.⁶⁴

Indications that racial issues still plagued the school system were evident in the criticism that Crim did not actively seek to hire more white teachers.⁶⁵ *The Atlanta Constitution* published an unflattering account of the public schools, in an article titled “City in Crisis.” Crim responded that he questioned whether the schools faced a crisis or a challenge.⁶⁶ In a methodical and logical manner, he delineated the six objectives of the school system and the means by which the objectives were to be accomplished. Stating that demonstration of improvement in student learning was paramount, Crim provided statistical evidence of gains already achieved, such as an increase in student achievement scores on the 1974 Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Other objectives included the creation of a reading center to train faculties, a grant to establish reading and math centers in nineteen schools, a curriculum revision project, a monthly newspaper to facilitate communication, the development

of a Parent Handbook, and an APS facts brochure. The objectives were accomplished despite financial cutbacks in the system due to declining enrollment.

Crim also responded to claims that the APS was heavy with administrators by noting that the system would be in compliance with the state guidelines for appropriate staff ratios for the 1975-76 school year.⁶⁷ When *The Atlanta Journal* published an article that was critical of APS, the chairman of the NAACP Education Committee, Nathaniel Ingram, responded that the series was intentionally planned to discredit Crim. Ingram further noted that the article revealed the prejudice of the newspaper's source, who referred to Crim as an "SOB." Ingram argued that the history of inequities in the school system were longstanding issues for APS, not Crim and his administration.⁶⁸

Interestingly, criticism of Crim ceased when he became one of five candidates interviewed for superintendent in the Chicago Public Schools.⁶⁹ Chicago had been Crim's home, so he was drawn to the position. In order to assure Crim of their satisfaction with his performance in APS, the Atlanta Board of Education passed a unanimous vote of confidence in hopes of retaining his services.⁷⁰ After the Chicago interview, and the vote of confidence, Crim withdrew his name as a candidate. He discussed the matter with his wife and family and decided it would be best to remain in Atlanta.⁷¹

Crim Acclimated


Crim's support in Atlanta increased after he decided to stay in the city. In 1976, the Georgia House of Representatives commended him for his outstanding service and dedication to the children of Georgia.⁷² Some criticized him as a complacent leader because he was soft-spoken and never lost his temper. This accusation was countered by his former colleagues, who said Crim's manner was a testament to his unfailing professionalism and faith in Christian principles such as "turn the other cheek." In the mid-1970s the U. S. was in an economic recession, and school systems experienced monetary restraints. For urban school systems such as Atlanta, declining enrollments exacerbated financial problems. Crim had to close many schools, in 1976 setting a record with the closure of fifteen school buildings.⁷³ The closings caused Reverend Benjamin Bickers, an African American minister, to curse at Crim, shouting, "You're the lowdownest SOB I've ever met. We're going to get rid of you, n——, if it's the last thing we do."⁷⁴ Crim remained calm, did not respond, and eventually was escorted from the board meeting by school officials. Remarking on the event, Crim noted that he "may be soft-spoken but he knows how to say no" and will continue to treat people "with the kind of respect and dignity that a person deserves."⁷⁵

Financial concerns did not end with school closings; decreasing revenues

also meant labor problems with both teachers and non-instructional personnel. In fact, the State, County and Municipal Employees Union waged a short strike in response to cutbacks. Declining student achievement and white flight remained ongoing concerns. Despite these challenges, Crim remained focused on the goal of educating Atlanta's children with the support of the community. He earned reappointment to a second term in 1977.⁷⁶

Crim received widespread recognition from his leadership of the APS and in 1978 was invited to join a national task force to address the problems of urban education. Members included Jesse Jackson and several other prominent leaders.⁷⁷ The same year, Crim was one of twelve U. S. educational leaders invited by the Republic of China (Taiwan) to tour Chinese schools. Crim's delegation was only the sixth to be invited to the country.⁷⁸ After going to Taiwan in December 1980, Crim wrote an APS report about his visits to K-12 and normal schools.⁷⁹ He concluded that the spiritual wealth of the Taiwanese people was more important than the economic wealth of its people. He admired Taiwan's educational community and criticized the United States for being too individualistic in its educational goals. In 1983, Crim spoke to the U. S. Senate's Subcommittee on Education in response to the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, "A Nation at Risk." Crim outlined how his strategies for school improvement began with "establishing expectations" and "convincing all the relative groups in the city," adding that these expectations "can be made to work."⁸⁰ Crim's vision for APS would continue to focus on encouraging all Atlantans to join as stakeholders in the education of children.

Crim's Educational Philosophy: A "Community of Believers"

 Crim believed that involving the community was essential to the success of the APS. From the beginning of his tenure in Atlanta, the merging of system-wide decisions with community involvement distinguished him from his predecessor. In 1974-1975 Crim held town hall style meetings in which he met with over ten thousand citizens to discern the community's goals for the school system. The feedback suggested four priorities: increase competency in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and basic mathematic skills; facilitate better job placement; guarantee the equal disbursement of resources to all city schools; and improve communication, not only with the public, but with students and fellow staff members.⁸¹

Crim believed the needs of the community should remain a priority of the school system, for without local aid the schools would fail. He found support for his initiatives from one of Atlanta's educational and civil rights leaders, Dr. Benjamin Mays, president of Morehouse College for 27 years.⁸² Like Crim, Mays had graduated from the University of Chicago; he later

served as president of the Atlanta Board of Education.⁸³ Mays was also a prominent civil rights leader who advised Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and U.S. Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter. Fourteen years before Crim arrived in Atlanta, Mays had already addressed African American education in a 1959 issue of *The Journal of Negro Education* when he noted that "the Negro community, particularly the leadership in the Negro Community, should be more than theoretically concerned with the excessive rate of delinquency among Negro youth..." and that "whether he accepts it or not, some leadership and responsibility are thrust upon every Negro who rises up above the masses."⁸⁴ Mays' and Crim's friendship became an essential element in the educational community Crim is credited for fostering in Atlanta. Their partnership helped to encourage what Crim would later term a "community of believers" to promote success and change in the Atlanta Public Schools. Crim noted that after supporting his initial appointment as superintendent of APS, "Mays took me under his protective wings and shared with me his profound knowledge and wisdom" which gave him the ability to bring stability back to APS.⁸⁵

While many saw the partnership between Mays and Crim as an asset for APS, they were sometimes criticized for excessively dominating the school board. In 1979 the Southern Center for Policy Studies at Clark College commissioned the report, "Consensus Politics in Atlanta School Board Decision Making, 1974-1978," which implied that Crim was able to dominate school board decisions with the assistance of Mays, and that the school board was a "legitimizing rather than a policy-making entity." In addition, the report claimed there was little public participation in school board matters, a critique that came as a shock to the administration, considering the substantial increase of community involvement since the beginning of Crim's tenure in Atlanta.⁸⁶

Crim, Mays, and several school board members quickly came to their own defense. Crim stated he "violently disagreed" with the study, and joked that at times he wished that it could be true, but it was simply not the case. Crim added that a few years earlier he was criticized for "waving" too much, but now he was accused of the opposite disposition.⁸⁷ Board member Carloyn Crowder stated that Crim was not given too much power, but that as he was the top administrator he was "expected to implement policies of the board and delegate them."⁸⁸ Mays contributed to the debate by remarking that he knew of no other "board of education that checks with the community, parents, and superintendent [more] than the board of education in Atlanta."⁸⁹ Nevertheless, parent organizations and all three Atlanta school professional employee organizations came out in support of the report, indicating they felt left out of some decisions. Crim would have to continue to work more towards creating his "community of believers" in APS over the next few years.

Although faith was beginning to be restored in the school system, the critique highlighted the fact that there remained some non-believers within the community.

Two years later Crim detailed how the citizens of Atlanta were transforming themselves into “a community of believers.” In a report he highlighted the accomplishments and challenges that APS experienced since his appointment as superintendent. Crim identified the groups of important stakeholders within the community that, through their actions, were becoming believers. He cited students, parents, administrators, teachers, media, religious groups, institutions of higher education, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and several local businesses. For example, Cola-Cola executives had visited sixth and seventh grade classes; Delta Airlines donated stocks to high-achieving students; and Ford Motor Company provided cars to be used in auto shop classes. Crim expressed appreciation for the monetary support from the local companies but, more importantly, saw their support as a testament that the community was restoring its faith in its public schools. Crim summarized his beliefs in the final paragraph:

Children in Atlanta are increasingly supported by a community of believers. They are regularly shown evidence that adults from all walks of life care. Children are given more opportunities to express themselves on the goals and objectives which they set for themselves and are established for them by others. Students are being challenged to succeed. Atlanta is a city of believers in children.⁹⁰

The common thread throughout Crim’s years as superintendent was his shared vision for creating “A Community of Believers.”⁹¹

Conclusion

Alonzo Crim retired after fifteen years as superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools. Considering the brevity of most superintendencies in recent years (with almost half of the superintendents exiting their positions within three years), Crim’s staying power at APS establishes that he enjoyed a certain amount of success as a leader.⁹² Improvement did not occur immediately, as Crim realized that “we can’t institute too many changes at once. We have to concentrate on one at a time... we cannot handle dramatic progress. We can’t stretch our staffs with expectations of high performance on every level all at once.”⁹³ He believed that real improvements required high expectations, but understood that all of the needed changes could not occur simultaneously without sacrificing quality.

Unfortunately for APS, integration was never truly accomplished during

Crim's tenure or after. During 2010-2011, the APS enrollment was eighty-six percent African American, eight percent Caucasian, four percent Hispanic, and two percent Multiracial, Asian, and American Indian, with seventy-five percent of the students receiving free or reduced lunch.⁹⁴ The demographics of APS do not reflect the demographics of the city, nor of the metropolitan area. But what do these numbers indicate about Crim's contributions to the system he led? In 1980, he replied to a report by attorney Margie Pitts Hanes, who claimed that "education in Atlanta's predominantly African American system is inferior."⁹⁵ Crim stated that "what is inferior in Atlanta and in our nation is citizens' ability and will to nurture and maintain desegregated communities to populate Atlanta and the nation's schools..." He urged citizens not to "blame the children for adult failures" or "blame the Atlanta Public Schools" for this situation.⁹⁶ Crim could not solve all the challenges posed by white flight, but he could call attention to the need for community support of public schools.

According to Matthew Lassiter, the greatest challenge civil rights leaders faced were not the virulent racists who threw rocks, but the "silent majority" of middle-class whites who embraced colorblind values but maintained all-white enclaves and schools.⁹⁷ The dream of integration remains elusive today, but is a sacred tenet nonetheless. Alonzo Crim faced enormous hurdles, but never lost sight of his belief that quality education for all children would strengthen not only the Atlanta Public schools, but the Atlanta community as a whole.

Historians need to explore the untold stories of educators who furthered the cause of civil rights in the post-*Brown* era.⁹⁸ While Atlanta faced many obstacles during this period, its experience with white flight was similar to that of many cities throughout the United States. African American educators who became superintendents of large urban school districts in the 1970s demonstrated varying degrees of success and failure in leading systems that had been weakened by opposition to desegregation. Today Crim's legacy is remembered at the Alonzo Crim Urban Education Center in Atlanta, which ensures "the availability of a prosperous and equitable school environment for our children who are least-served by urban schools so as to empower them and optimize the life chances of these children and families."⁹⁹

Notes

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