

Takin' You to School:

Issues in Education from a Historical Prospective

AHTC Summer Institute Lesson—2009

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Part 3: Racial Inequalities in Education

Primary Source 1: Personal letter from Mrs. D. DeBaum to Cobden, IL Board of Education, June 7, 1905; Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL.

Description: An African American mother is requesting that something be done to further the education of her daughter, Ruth.

Prompts:

- How does Mrs. DeBaum describe the “colored school”?
- Would you infer from this statement that the white schools would be different? How?
- What is the fundamental difference between white and black schools in Cobden?
- What options does Mrs. DeBaum have regarding her daughter’s education?
- She gives the board two options. What are they? Are these reasonable?
- How has the school dealt with Mrs. DeBaum before? What does this say about her?
- According to her mother, what goal does Ruth DeBaum have? What does this letter imply about Ruth?
- While schools today are integrated, do they provide an equal educational experience? What factors determine the quality of a school? How can there be equity?

Primary Source 2: “Cobden’s Race Problem”, unknown newspaper (1905); Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL.

Description: This article summarizes the case and the issues before the school board regarding possible school integration.

Prompts:

- What does the first paragraph say about the past policies of Cobden School District?
- What does the article say is the position of the State Superintendent of Public Schools?

- Is Ruth alone is this experience? What does that signify about the future relevance of this issue?
- How does the author predict that this situation will be resolved?
- Is Cobden the only district dealing with this issue in Illinois?
- Is there bias in the tone of the reporter? Pick out specific sections to support your claim.
- Is the issue of school equality still in the news today?
- What are the issues?
- Do the media seem to take a particular side in terms of their reporting?

Primary Source 3: Letter from A. F. Hunsaker (Principal of Cobden High School) to Alfred Bayless (Superintendent of Illinois Schools), Sept. 15, 1905; Illinois State Archives, Springfield, IL.

Description: This letter (one of three from school personnel to the state office) defines the school's clear stance on the issue of accepting Ruth DeBaum.

Prompts:

- How does the principal explain the school's position to the superintendent?
- What are the fundamental differences between the school's position and that of the DeBaum family?
- Do you think that testing to earn a diploma is appropriate and fair?
- How does the school argue that it is being fair?
- How does the principal describe the "colored school"? Does it sound equal?
- How should the Superintendent of Public Schools respond to this letter?

Enrichment:

Examine the differing decisions in [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) and [Brown v. Board of Education](#). Why did the courts rule in 1954 that "separate" was not "equal", especially as it applied to schools?