Little Rock Nine: 1957 Crisis at Central High School

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public education was a violation of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It was known as the *Oliver Brown et al v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. As school districts across the South sought various ways to respond to the court’s ruling, Little Rock Central High School became the symbol of resistance to desegregation.

On May 22, 1954, the Little Rock School Board issued a statement saying that it would comply with the Supreme Court’s decision once the court outlined the method and time frame for implementation. Meanwhile, the school board directed Superintendent Virgil Blossom to formulate a plan for desegregation. His plan, known as the Blossom Plan, was adopted in May of 1955. Originally conceived to begin at the elementary school level, school district officials decided to begin “token” desegregation in the fall of 1957 at the all-white Central High School only.

The Blossom Plan also called for desegregation to expand the junior high level by 1960 and the elementary level by 1963. The plan also included a transfer provision that would allow any student to transfer from a school where his/her race was in the minority. This action assured that students at both Dunbar and Horace Mann High School would remain predominately African American, but white students zoned for both could transfer to another school. Later that month, the Supreme Court issued the Brown II decision that directed districts to desegregate with “all deliberate speed.”

In February 1956, the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund filed suit against the Little Rock School District on behalf of 33 African American students who had attempted to register in all-white schools. In the suit, Aaron v. Cooper, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit upheld the school district’s position that the Blossom Plan complied with the Supreme Court’s instructions. The federal court retained jurisdiction in the case, making compliance with the plan mandatory.

Meanwhile, across the South, resistance to desegregation grew. Eighteen United States Senators and 81 Congressmen (including all eight members from Arkansas), signed the Southern Manifesto that denounced the Supreme Court’s decision and urged southern states to resist it. In Little Rock, the Capital Citizens’ Council—a local version of the white citizens’ councils that were emerging across Arkansas and the South—formed in 1956 and promoted public resistance to desegregation. The organization purchased newspaper advertisements attacking integration and held rallies at which speakers challenged Arkansans to resist. In one of the more publicized events, Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin and former Georgia State Legislator, Roy Harris, frequent speakers at white citizens’ council rallies across the South, assured listeners at a Capital Citizens’ Council fundraiser that the State of Georgia would not allow school desegregation and called upon Arkansans to support white supremacy and defend segregation.

With fall of 1957 fast approaching, both segregationists and school district officials appealed to Governor Orval Faubus to take action to preserve order. In a letter writing campaign to the governor, segregationists predicted that violence would erupt if desegregation proceeded at Central High School. School district officials appealed to the governor to assure the public that desegregation would proceed smoothly. Governor Faubus, in turn, asked the federal government for assistance in the event of trouble. The head of the U.S. Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division met with Faubus on August 28, 1957, and advised him that the federal government could not promise advance responsibility for maintaining order. Angered when the press received nor Faubus told reporters that the federal government was trying to force integration on an unwilling public while at the same time demanding that states handle any problems that might arise on their own.

Closely aligned with the Capital Citizens’ Council, the Mother’s League of Central High formed in August and petitioned the governor to prevent desegregation at the school. The group filed suit seeking a temporary injunction against integration. Pulaski Chancellor Murray Reed granted the injunction on the grounds that desegregation could lead to violence. The next day, however, Federal District Judge Ronald Davies nullified the injunction and ordered the Little Rock School Board to proceed with its desegregation plan. The conflict reached crisis proportions when Governor Faubus appeared on television and announced that he had called out units of the Arkansas National Guard to prevent violence at Central High School, saying “There is evidence of disorder and threats of disorder which could have but one inevitable result—that is violence which can lead to injury and the doing of harm to persons and property.” School district officials advised the African American students who had registered at Central High School not to try to attend for this first day of classes. Judge Davies ordered the school board to proceed with desegregation the next day.

On September 4, 1957, nine African American students attempted to enter Central High School. Several of them made their way to one corner of the campus where they were turned away by the National Guard. One of them, fifteen year old Elizabeth Eckford, arrived at the north end of the campus and was directed away by National Guardsmen. She walked south down Park Street in front of the school campus, surrounded by a growing crowd of protestors who jeered and taunted her. She made her way to a bus stop on the south side of the campus and was able to board a bus and get away to safety. The next morning, people around the country and world opened their newspapers to the image of a teenager besieged by an angry mob of students and adults.

The Little Rock School Board asked Judge Davies to temporarily suspend his desegregation order, but the judge refused and ordered the school district to proceed with desegregation. The judge also instructed the U.S. Attorney General to file a petition for an injunction against Governor Faubus and two officers of the Arkansas National Guard to prevent them from obstructing the court order to desegregate. In the interim, U.S. Congressman Brooks Hays arranged a meeting between Arkansas’ governor and President Dwight D. Eisenhower to try and reach a solution to the crisis. They met at President Eisenhower’s vacation home in Newport, Rhode Island, on September 14, but the meeting adjourned without an agreement to resolve the situation.

On September 20, 1957, Judge Davies ordered the governor and National Guard commanders to stop interfering with the court’s desegregation order. Government Faubus removed the guardsmen from the school and left the state for a southern governors conference in Georgia. The following Monday, September 23, Little Rock police were left to control an unruly mob that quickly grew to over 1,000 people as the nine African American students entered the school through a side door two weeks after school began. The crowd’s attention was diverted when some of the protestors chased and beat four African Americans reporters outside the school. By lunchtime, police and school officials feared that some in the crowd might try to storm the school and removed the nine students for their safety. Little Rock Mayor Woodrow Mann asked the federal government for assistance and President Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10730, sending in units of the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division and federalizing the Arkansas National Guard.

U.S. Army troops escorted the “Little Rock Nine,” as they became known, into Central High School on September 25, 1957. After weeks of turmoil and trying to keep up with their work without attending school, the students went to their classes guarded by soldiers. Governor Faubus appeared on television saying that Little Rock was “now an occupied territory.” By October 1, most of the enforcement duty was turned over to the Arkansas National Guard troops while the U.S. Army troops were completely removed by the end of November. On October 25, one month after they arrived with a federal troop escort, the Little Rock Nine rode to school for the first time in civilian vehicles.

While conditions calmed outside the campus, inside the school, the Little Rock Nine endured an endless campaign of verbal and physical harassment at the hands of some of their fellow students for the remainder of the year. More than 100 white students were suspended and four were expelled during the year. One of the nine students, Minnijean Brown, was expelled in February 1958 for retaliating against the abuse.

In spite of the abuse, the bomb threats, and all other disruptions to the learning environment, the only senior among the nine students, Ernest Green, became Central High School’s first African American graduate on May 25, 1958. Of his experience that year, Green said, “It’s been an interesting year…I’ve had a course in human relations first hand.” The 1957 Central High Crisis came to symbolize both massive resistance to social change and the federal government’s commitment to enforcing African American’s civil rights. Its nine students showed uncommon bravery and courage in the face of adversity.