

Integrating the Ypsilanti Public Schools in the Mid-1970s

BY JERRY JENNINGS

Author's Perspective

This essay is about the public schools in the city and township that now comprise the Ypsilanti Community Schools District. It is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of the educational programs or staff employed by the district. Rather, it is primarily a review and point of view from a former member of the school board who served a single four-year term, from 1972 to 1976.

In the forty-five years since that time there have been many social, economic, and population changes in this geographic region of Michigan that have affected public schools. Changes in school leadership at the local and state levels have also significantly affected the public schools as political interests place greater support on the concept of privatizing public education. This is a discussion of the changes in the district's elementary schools that led to the integration of Black children enrolled in its elementary schools; it focuses specifically on the Perry Elementary School, which is located on the south side of Ypsilanti.

Free and Equal Education

The Ypsilanti school district, in 1972, included ten elementary schools: Erickson, George, Adams, Ardis, Woodruff, Perry, Chapelle, Estabrook, Central, and Fletcher; two middle schools (East and West); and one high school. Virtually all children and youth in the city and township attended those schools. The local St. John's Catholic elementary school had closed in the early 1970s. The charter school concept for Michigan had not yet been developed and private or church-associated schools in Ypsilanti accommodated very few children.

A major national issue through the 1960s and into the 1970s was the racial makeup of our communities and schools. Historically, public school districts throughout the

nation were structured along racial lines, with schools being built to serve exclusively Black student populations in what were isolated Black neighborhoods. Even though it was believed children in a Black neighborhood would receive the same education as white children in a white neighborhood, the reality was that it did not and could not always happen.

Ypsilanti has had a Black population almost from its founding in 1823. The town was a participant in the Underground Railroad, with several stations in the immediate area. However, as the community grew, most Black citizens who came here settled on the south side of the community, primarily south of Michigan Avenue (a.k.a., the Chicago Road or U.S. Highway 12). This avenue was often referred to as the dividing line between Ypsilanti's white and Black communities.

As the community grew, we can assume that school administrators realized the importance of educating Black children and decided to build a school on the south side of town. Thus, Perry Elementary School on Harriet Street was constructed, and it became an all-Black school.

Ypsilanti built two middle schools in the 1950s: East and West. Children completing the first six years of school at Perry, typically now eleven years of age, were divided between the two middle schools. East Middle School was near the Black community, and it had a larger number of Black children enrolled than did West Middle.

The single high school, just north of downtown, had been built to serve all high school students in Ypsilanti. In 1972, a new high school was built on the far west side, at the border of Ypsilanti Township and the City of Ypsilanti. All high school students on the east side of the city and in the township had to be bused to that building.

Until 1957, all Ypsilanti children above sixth grade in the city attended integrated schools. No restrictions by policy or practice existed, saying that a child in Ypsilanti could not attend a given school because of color or race. However, from an operational and management standpoint it was understood that children in the prominently Black Perry Elementary School neighborhood would attend that school from kindergarten through sixth grade. The families that surrounded it considered Perry their neighborhood school. If parents preferred that their child attend any of the other nine elementary schools in the district, transportation would be on them.

On the national level in the 1960s, social and cultural forces were creating a greater awareness of inequities between white and Black populations in our nation. Awareness that children were not receiving the same level and quality of education in communities because of their color or race resulted in the school integration movement. Federal legislation mandated changes in schools to provide "equal" education opportunities for children at all grade levels. School attendance was not to be dictated by a child's color or race.



Perry Child Development Center, 2022

Bringing Change to Perry

To avoid sanctions by the federal government from the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Ypsilanti school board, in 1975, chose to make changes in their school attendance policies. Because the district had an elementary school in a Black neighborhood that was educating only Black students, when all other buildings were educating primarily white students, discussions now centered on the likelihood of having to transport students from Perry to other schools in the district. The plan was to continue to use the Perry school building because all other elementary buildings in the district were at capacity. The building would continue as an elementary school. Thus, any plan under consideration had nearly equal numbers of Black and white students assigned to every grade level. Of course, it was going to be necessary for white elementary students from neighborhoods other than the Perry neighborhood to be transported by bus to Perry to achieve the needed balance.

The following action was taken, as reported in board of education minutes of January 12, 1976:

The board of education of the school district of Ypsilanti supports the goal of quality education for all students in Ypsilanti Public Schools. As one effort in working toward this goal, the board will seek to align attendance areas for the elementary

schools to promote school environments that represent multi-ethnic and multi-racial compositions of the Ypsilanti community, and to correct population imbalance that exists. To this end the board established and charged the *1975-76 Elementary Enrollment Study Task Force* with providing recommendations for future schools concerning realignment of elementary school attendance areas for the 1976-77 school year, as well as all concomitant issues and policies that task reveals, including racial balance, transportation, future enrollments, and population trends.

This provided the rationale to move ahead with a plan to create fully integrated schools and classrooms throughout the district at all grade levels. Thus, it was recognized that enrollment at the Perry Elementary School needed to be changed to reflect this mandate. The task force created by this action reviewed several integration plans used or suggested by other districts in the nation. None of those plans fit the requirements for Ypsilanti and were subsequently rejected.

Following discussion with elementary school principals and administrative staff the recommendation sent to the board of education was to convert Perry to a preschool and kindergarten building. Kindergarten students from all elementary schools would be sent to Perry. All students above the kindergarten level at Perry would be distributed to the other eight elementary schools.

Continued discussion of this recommendation of the board with parents and community leaders resulted in the following action on June 14, 1976:

It was moved by Dr. Jennings and supported by Mr. Cosgrove that the board of education change the current Perry Elementary School to a Child Development Center housing all kindergarten students in the district, all readiness kindergarten programs, and all pre-school programs, including mandatory special education, and that the current Perry students (grades 1-6) be transported to other elementary schools in the district.

Additional action taken by the board on that same date provided the following guidelines for program development:

It was moved by Mrs. Harrison and supported by Mr. Elliott that the board of education approve the policy governing enrollment at the new Child Development Center, since the center has been created by board action as the official kindergarten and preschool program for the Ypsilanti Public Schools, and that the center will be based on the continuum of curricular and educational services of the school district; and that all students entering the Ypsilanti Public Schools ages 0-6 will be served by the center.

The rationale of the administrative staff and board of education for creating a single preschool and kindergarten building recognized at least two key factors: preschool has been determined to be a significant experience for providing socializing and preparatory-school experiences for children before entering kindergarten. Also, since kindergarten is the first school experience for children, problems associated with older children mingling with kindergartners in the same building would improve their adjustment to the beginning of their school years.

As expected, there were concerns and objections raised by skeptical parents. Most prominent among these objections was that Ypsilanti did not have a race problem and that the burden for change to achieve integration would fall primarily on the Black community whose children were going to be moved to other elementary buildings.

The changes that had to be made at Perry School to accommodate many preschool and kindergarten students required immediate physical changes to its building. Every classroom was equipped with furniture and teaching materials from the kindergarten classrooms at the other eight school buildings. The Perry building was later remodeled and expanded in the early 1980s to fully accommodate all the new programs created by the board, including renaming it the Early Childhood Development Center. Today, it is called the Perry Early Learning Center.

A Note on Sources

Information for this essay comes from the author's personal experience. Additional information comes from an interview with Ypsilanti Community Schools Assistant Superintendent Carlos Lopez, the minutes of the Ypsilanti Board of Education including Board Action #1738 (January 12, 1976) and Board Action #1837 (June 14, 1976), and the Ypsilanti Community Schools website. The photograph is from the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

About the Author

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