

Briggs v. Elliott

Testimony of H. B. Betchman
Superintendent, District No. 22
Summerton Schools

[Mr. Figgs represents the school district.]

Mr. Figg: We call Mr. Betchman as our next witness.

H. B. BETCHMAN called as a witness on behalf of the Defendants, being first duly sworn, was examined and testified as follows:

Direct examination.

By Mr. Figg:

Q. Mr. Betchman, where do you live?

A. Summerton.

Q. How long have you lived there in Summerton?

A. Twenty-five years.

Q. What official position there do you have in the public school system of Summerton, District No. 22?

A. I am Superintendent of schools.

Q. How long have you been superintendent of schools?

A. For about fourteen years.

Q. What did you do before that?

A. I was principal of the school for about four or five years and two years at Chafin and coach.

Q. And what schools does School District No. 22 presently operate?

A. Summerton elementary, and High, Scott's Branch elementary, and High School, Ram Bay elementary and Liberty Hill elementary.

Q. Summerton High School is operated by what districts?

A. Well, it is operated by 8, 30, 22, 4 and 3, if I said a while ago it was operated by 22, I did not mean that was the only district.

Q. And that is a centralized High School District?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. A separate body politic from School District No.22?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And the Board of that High School District is composed of the board Chairmen of the component districts?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. School District 22 is represented on that Board by whom?

A. Mr. R. M. Elliott.

Q. Who testified this morning?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. He is Chairman of School District No. 22?

A. On the District 22 Board and Summerton High School Body.

Q. And Mr. Crow has testified that he was down there last week to look at the schools and get information for the purpose of establishing the district potential under the new school Act, is that correct?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. He saw you while he was there?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And got the information that he has from you?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Where did you get it from?

A. I compiled it from the County Superintendent of Education's Office.

Q. You got it from the official record.

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Now the Ram Bay, two-teacher school is located where in your district?

A. That is in the far eastern corner of the district.

Q. And is that in a rural section of the district?

A. Yes, sir; it is.

Q. How many miles is it from Summerton?

A. I would say five or six miles.

Q. Now the Town of Summerton is in School District 22?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. How large approximately, is the Town of Summerton in population?

A. It has about 1,500 people in it.

Q. About 1,500?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Is there any other town in that school district?

A. No, sir.

Q. The rest of them are outside the corporate limits of Summerton and that is in strictly an agricultural section?

A. It is entirely agricultural.

Q. Where is the Liberty Hill School in that District, that four-teacher school?

A. In the extreme western part of the district.

Q. About how far from the Town of Summerton?

A. About three miles.

Q. Is or not that school located there for the benefit of people living in that section of the school district?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Now do the Trustees propose to continue the Ram Bay school indefinitely, that two-teacher school?

A. No, sir.

Q. Have they made efforts to get rid of it before?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. When was that?

A. I would say about 1936 or 1937.

Q. Was it actually discontinued by the Trustees at one time?

A. I am not sure, but I think it was.

Q. Well, why was it kept if it was once discontinued?

A. Well, Summerton, District 22, does not have any transportation for white or colored, and those colored people in that section of the country wished it continued, if they would not continue it, those children would have a long ways to go to come to Summerton.

Q. So it was continued there because of the number of people whose children lived in that area and who wished that school to be kept in operation?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Rather than have it closed and have their children transferred to Scotts Branch or some other school in the district.

A. Yes, sir.

Q. You say there was no transportation for school pupils of either race furnished by the school district No. 22?

A. No, sir.

Q. Is that transportation to Summerton High School from the other component Districts?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And the High School itself is located in District No. 22, and there is none in the others, so those pupils are brought to this centralized high school by transportation furnished by other component districts?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And do the white pupils from other districts come to Summerton elementary schools?

A. They do, sir.

Q. Do these other districts have any other elementary or grammar schools?

A. No, sir.

Q. These other four do not have any schools except the Negro schools?

A. That's right.

Q. And those pupils come to the elementary and high school located in the Town of Summerton?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. For all practical purposes there has already been a consolidation as far as the white schools are concerned?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Are you familiar with the colored schools in those four districts?

A. No, sir.

Q. Now, something was said here about improving the grounds around the Summerton elementary school, what about those grounds?

A. There was no tar or treatment or anything within the Summerton school grounds, other than the high school; you are speaking of the elementary school

now; well there is not anything in there.

Q. What about the High School?

A. The High School has a drive-way around, around in front which is surface treated by the Highway Department, and I understand the State Highway Department took over that part and have it marked off.

Q. That is a curcular drive up to the front of the school and that is surface treated?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. How about the rest of the grounds around there, have they been surface treated, too?

A. No, sir.

Q. That centralized High School was built by the five districts?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Which came together under a separate body politic and issued bonds and built that school?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Prior to that time where had the white High School pupils gone?

A. Well, they had, but not all, come to Summerton.

Q. What school did they go to?

A. To Summerton, some came to Summerton elementary school, too.

Q. How many rooms has that got?

A. Eight.

Q. Eight rooms?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. When was the Summerton High School built?

A. In the fall of 1936, we went into it.

Q. It was built in 1936?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. What kind of project was that?

A. A PWA project.

Q. A loan and grant project when the Federal Government was trying to stimulate employment?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And the District applied for a loan and grant project to build that school?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And from that loan and grant project came the Summerton elementary school, that eight-room building?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Do you know whether there was an application for a project for a colored school also at that time?

A. Yes, sir; it was tried, but as the education of eight percent faced us, and the PWA went out of business, we were taxed up to our limitation.

Q. Which was built first, the Summerton High School or the Scott's Branch school?

A. Summerton High School.

Q. Which was the last school built in the district?

A. Scott's Branch.

Q. How long was that built after Summerton High School?

A. After we built the High School, it was about a year or two, their school burned down, then we built the Scott's Branch School about two years after, I guess.

Q. How did you build the Scott's Branch School?

A. Where did we get the money?

Q. Yes.

A. We borrowed it from the Sinking Fund.

Q. From the Sinking Fund?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. According to what specifications was the Scott's Branch built?

A. We used the same specifications as for our High School. We had those approved and used them.

Q. Were those plans approved by the State Department of Education for school house construction?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And you would say the floor-plan was substantially the same as that used in the Summerton High School?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Did it actually have more room?

A. Scott's Branch?

Q. Yes.

A. I think it has one, two, four, six; yes, it has one or two more rooms.

Q. Has it been necessary to add additional rooms to Scott's Branch since it was built?

A. Yes, sir; we had a tremendous increase over there ever since Santee-Cooper was built. I have a scale back from that time as to how the increase has come along and we have had to build three more rooms there since then, some just recently.

Q. How did the building of the Santee-Cooper increase your school population?

A. It run a lot of people out as the water filled in, it ran them out of the water.

Q. They had to move from where the water was going and so they moved up your way?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. They were practically all Negroes?

A. I think we increased about 190 students from that area. I have a document compiled by one of my school principals, and he traced them from back there up to Summerton.

Q. And that was when—do you recall when that project was being built; was it not in the late '30s, since the Scott's Branch School was built?

A. Yes, sir; since the first building was built.

Q. And you have had to add on extra rooms?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Now you have how many grades in Scott's Branch School?

A. Twelve grades.

Q. How many teachers there?

A. Fourteen teachers.

Q. Fourteen?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Now I note of the figures Mr. Crow had as to your potential borrowing power of your district, that the average daily attendance of the Negro schools was not available, have you any figures on the percentage?

A. Yes, sir; I have them all, sir.

Q. Would you give them to us?

A. In Scott's Branch, the enrollment was 694, average daily attendance was 462.

Q. Where did you get those figures?

A. Those reports were given to me by the various principals of these different schools.

Now in the Ram Bay school, the average enrollment was 67, and the average daily attendance was 43.4.

Liberty Hill had an average enrollment of 105 and an average daily attendance of 72.61. That is up through the eighth month. I am mighty afraid it is going to be lower after the eighth month.

Q. These are current figures through the eighth month of this school year?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Are there any particular times of the year when your average daily attendance suffers worse than at others?

A. Yes, sir; at the beginning and at the ending of the year.

Q. For how long at the beginning?

A. Well, they ask us all along, we survey the county and keep in touch with things, and they want us to keep the schools closed until we can get the cotton picked and sometimes that runs us a little late.

I know my principal this year asked about running on Saturdays and I asked him a question about running on Saturdays as to whether his attendance wouldn't be lower, and he said "They will be absent a day whether we run on Saturday or not." Then at the end of the year the attendance is down again.

Q. And that lasts about how long?

A. It starts just about the end of the eighth month and runs through the ninth months, four weeks, I'd say.

Q. What accounts for that absenteeism?

A. Well, I will say because they are most all small farmers and live in rural sections and say they want the children to go out to work, and then my principal tells me that he is going to be out one day a week anyway all during the year, I don't know why, but I guess he can tell you when he gets on the stand.

Q. Does that two months at the beginning and at the end of the school year become a definite problem in the operation of the schools?

A. Yes, sir; it is a tremendous problem. Under that setup we have twenty teachers in the three schools and with an average attendance of thirty, it looks like I am going to lose a teacher if attendance does not pick up.

Q. That is based on what?

A. On enrollment and average attendance, on both.

Q. It is based on both?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. So it has an effect upon the financial ability of the district to carry a certain number of teachers?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Does it also have an effect upon the educational situation in general in the schools?

A. Yes, sir. Absenteeism hurts.

Q. Is it good to have that much absenteeism from an educational standpoint?

A. No, sir.

Q. Have efforts been made under the compulsory education law to militate against that?

A. We insist upon that, and we have our teachers to teach the bad result of absenteeism, and also insist that the teachers go around quite a bit among the people, it is hard for me to ever find them, so the teachers do what they can about it.

Q. What are they doing?

A. Working they say.

Q. You mean working the field?

A. Well, I can't say about that, sir; I don't know.

Q. That is what you understand is the reason they are at home?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. That their parents keep them home to work?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Do a lot of parents of these colored pupils operate their own farms?

A. A good many are small farmers; yes, sir.

Q. Now what is the daily average attendance in the white schools?

A. Can I look at my notes?

Judge Parker: Yes, that is all right, read them, if you want to.

A. Up through the eighth month it is 254 and that is 91%.

Q. Ninety-one percent daily average attendance on the white pupils, and I believe you said the white pupils come from the five districts?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Now, Mr. Betchman, in reference to the furnishing of the building, and facilities and educational opportunities in your District to all pupils, will the 1951 legislation be of substantial assistance to that district?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And do you know that an application has already been requested for permission to use the full potential of the district to obtain the necessary funds?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Is it the policy of the Trustees and yourself and your administrators of this district to utilize to the fullest advantage the resources that will now be at hand to develop the educational facilities and education in that district?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. What is the condition of the Summerton elementary school physically?

A. It is bad, too, sir.

Q. That was built, I believe in 1907?

A. In 1907, yes.

Q. They got the sandstone right on the spot did they not, or I believe the legend so has it.

A. No, they built the cement blocks right there on the spot.

Q. Is the building now in a good state of repair?

A. It is practically beyond repair.

Q. It is practically beyond repair?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Which would you say, if you had to compare the two, was in a better state of repair, or better condition, Scott's Branch or Summerton?

A. From a physical condition I would a lot rather have Scott's Branch over a plant that was provided in 1934 or 1935 and that was planned similar to our high school and has lighting that is so much better.

Q. The lighting is better in the Scott's Branch School?

A. Yes, sir; it is.

Q. The lay-out is modern?

A. Yes, sir; it is a single story building and Summerton is a two-story building and the stone is beginning to crack on the corners and is beginning to decay, and---

Judge Parker: In the light of your admission of this morning what is the significance of all this, Mr. Figg?

Mr. Figg: Perhaps I am going off the track a little, your Honor, but I was just trying to develop the background.

Judge Parker: That would be most material if you hadn't made those admissions, but having admitted the conditions are not equal, you are now trying to bring up the equality, and I do not see where that is pertinent. You need not waste much time on this.

Mr. Figg: I agree with your Honor, I was attempting to explain something that did not count. I will turn the witness over to the other side.

Cross-examination.

By Mr. Marshall:

Q. I will just ask you two or three questions. Isn't one of the reasons for absenteeism from school is that the schools are in such bad shape?

Judge Parker: I didn't understand that question.

Q. Isn't one of the reasons for absenteeism from school the fact that the schools are in bad shape?

A. I won't say that, because in comparison with our two schools the elementary school enrollment is up. I think it absolutely the case of small farmers and their work, wanting their children to help on the farm.

Q. I am not asking you, sir, about District 22 alone, I am speaking about the general rule for absenteeism, isn't that one of the reasons accepted by educators?

A. That absenteeism is due to schools being in bad condition?

Q. Yes, that sometimes the condition of the school gives no encouragement to the child to come back.

A. Yes, sir; sometimes that is true.

Mr. Marshall: That is all.

Judge Parker: Do you have any more questions, Mr. Figg?

Mr. Figg: No, sir.

Judge Parker: Come down.

(Whereupon, the witness was excused.)