

Integration Now for Negro History

White Plains, a fast-growing suburb (population: 55,000) in New York's well-to-do Westchester County, has been widely praised for its effective, voluntary, community-wide school integration. It therefore came as a shock when last week its 11 public schools were shut down for a day to cool off racial tensions.

The crisis arose from Negro-led student demonstrations for greater recognition of Negroes. Although the controversy included complaints that not enough Negroes were represented on the student prom committee, a major issue was that greater stress should be given to Negro history and culture in the curriculum.

Changes Planned

Manson A. Donaghey, the high school principal, said that demands for more seminars concerning Negroes in American life had been granted and assemblies dealing with Negro contributions to America would be scheduled.

While the local flare-up was pacified, demands for more seminars constitute an important issue across the country. The question is how the intolerable neglect of the Negro's part in American history—almost total in the days before the civil rights movement of the current decade—can

be corrected with maximum educational and historical gains.

There is danger in increased Black Nationalist pressures to turn "Black subject matter" into a separatist piece of education. This is not a new phenomenon. Special interest groups, from professional anti-Communists to professional prohibitionists, have frequently asked for special courses on their own special crusades, to the detriment of sound education.

Last week, under the auspices of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, Quadrangle Books published a "Teachers' Guide to American Negro History," which may help to point schools in a more constructive direction.

William Loren Katz, the author, has taught high school history since 1952, first in New York and now in the integrated school system of Greenburgh District No. 8 in Hartsdale, not far from White Plains. He has specialized in the study of Negro history since his high school days in the nineteen-forties.

Mr. Katz leaves no doubt about past sins of omission. "Even Paul Revere's famous drawing of the Boston Massacre portrays a battle among whites, despite the fact that Negroes were present and one leader, Crispus Attucks, was among the

five American martyrs," he said.

Nor does he question that the pattern began with a purpose—"the assertion that the Negro has no history worth mentioning is basic to the theory that he has no humanity worth defending." Eventually the pattern became frozen so that even respected white Northern historians perpetuated it. Thus, Mr. Katz says, they could ignore that the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, composing a fifth of all the cavalry assigned to the pacification of the West, were all-Negro regiments.

Negro History

He added that John J. Pershing won the nickname of Black Jack for leading a company of the Tenth against Indians and bandits in Montana, against Spaniards at San Juan Hill and against Pancho Villa in Mexico. Even at the country's birth, 5,000 Negroes fought alongside George Washington, in largely integrated units. And so the list goes, to include 51 Negro winners of the Medal of Honor, the highest military decoration and, as the nation was tragically reminded last week, three Negro Nobel Peace Prize recipients.

But Mr. Katz also insists that the task of the school is to "place the Negro in appropriate places in the American his-

tory curriculum, unit by unit of study." This — rather than the segregated introduction of "Negro history" — is the sound approach. The teacher's guide tries to show, period by period of American history, how the Negro part in it can be properly merged with it, what materials are available and what outside reading might be suggested.

Mr. Katz cited the destructive example of the principal who asked teachers to spend one class period discussing famous Negro leaders. Even so well-intentioned an order "segregated the Negro again, honoring him in grand isolation."

The by-product of such historical separatism is — either by design or by default — a substitution of anti-white bias for anti-Negro bias.

History, properly taught, must not ignore the anti-Negro brutality as part of the American past. But Mr. Katz stressed that teachers must also point out that the Negro in America "has always had whites who are willing to fight for his rights" and that, though too few in numbers, they had risked their lives and fortunes for their convictions.

It would be wrong to teach the history of World War II without telling of the extermination of six million Jews. But it does not follow that the history of the Jews should be taught as a separate unit nor that the action

taken by a few to save some Jewish lives should be ignored.

Heroes and Common Persons

Finally, it is insulting and unproductive to confine the approach to Negro history to the study of the heroes and success stories. Mr. Katz warns: "In studying history we must be careful to see that the success of the few does not blind us to the plight of the many . . . Our heroes should not obscure our common people."

Some of the omissions of the past grew out of the obsession with assimilation. To admit differences was un-American. This hides the fact that Columbus was an Italian or Samuel Gompers a Jew. The Negro's protest that such "non-discrimination" in fact penalizes the mass of those who are different has been a great service. It has destroyed the myth of the automatic melting pot.

But these gains could be wiped out by a separatist revisionism of curriculum and history. Both history and teaching need to be corrected. Distortions must be eliminated and omitted chapters filled in. But overcompensation or segregated history are not the answer. The issue is not how to appease guilty consciences but how to move closer to peace through the search for truth.

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