



**BETTER OFF
WITHOUT
'EM**

**A NORTHERN MANIFESTO
FOR SOUTHERN SECESSION**

**CHUCK
THOMPSON**

CHAPTER 5

Education: Arkansas, Mississippi, and the Three Rs of Southern Schools—Revenue, Resentment, Resegregation

The Little Rock School District needs a new superintendent.

This is not an unfamiliar situation for the school board, administrators, teachers, parents, students, and residents of the largest school district in Arkansas. The district has more trouble keeping superintendents than Bill Clinton once had keeping secrets. It's blazed through fifteen of them over the last twenty-five years.

Though superintendent of a large, well-funded district in a capital city should be one of the most coveted jobs for school administrators across the country, almost no one bothers to re-up at the end of their two- or three-year terms guiding Little Rock schools. Some, like Roy Brooks, in 2007, get pilloried in the press and then canned. After an acrimonious tenure fighting rival factions within the local education power structure, the school board decided not to renew the contract of its most recent superintendent, Dr. Linda Watson.

"Not really," Watson told Little Rock's FOX 16 news when asked if her spring 2011 termination surprised her, tacitly acknowledging what one Little Rock middle school principal described to me as the "poor man's politics" of local education in the South.¹

"You get in and you get your friends jobs in the district, no matter how ignorant they are," the principal told me. "It's a complete political thing."

The man brought in to clean up Little Rock's latest education mess and find the district its new leader is Dr. Tom Jacobson, cofounder and CEO of the Omaha, Nebraska-based executive recruitment firm McPherson & Jacobson. Hired by the Little Rock School District, the company specializes in placing executives in government and public school positions.

A longtime public school administrator himself, and also a current full-time education professor at the University of Nebraska Kearney, the sixty-four-year-

old Dr. Tom has the air of put-upon, schoolmarm authority built into his involuntary nervous system. Though his wire-frame glasses sit too tightly on his paunchy, pink face and pockmarked drinker's nose, his jaw remains firm, his eyes on the knife-edge of impatience. The minute he steps in front of a crowd you sense a man who has waged thousands of battles with divided boards, disgruntled unions, irresponsible kids, and yokel parents, and come away with a career winning percentage that's probably just above .500.

You also see a man in a dark pin-striped suit and tassled brown loafers on the verge of retirement who wonders what the fuck he's doing at six o'clock at night at a two-bit high school in Little Rock Fucking Arkansas leading the twenty-second of twenty-seven McPherson & Jacobson public forums to solicit community input on the new superintendent while his wife is at home doing needlepoint inside their cozy three-bedroom ranch house in Omaha with a roast steaming away in the Crock-Pot on the kitchen counter. Instead, Dr. Tom finds himself at J. A. Fair High School, an institution described to me two hours earlier by *Arkansas Times* editor in chief Max Brantley as "a genuine piece of shit."

"The student body test scores are terrible, it has demoralized staff, kids are getting away with murder," Brantley has told me.

Tonight's community meeting to discuss the hiring of the new superintendent is taking place in the school's "media room." Which means library. Which also means that even socially conservative Arkansas isn't immune from the asinine mania to replace perfectly good, descriptive names with new ones every ten years. Anybody seen a "comic book" or "strip joint" lately, or have we all now somehow agreed to "graphic novel" and "gentleman's club"?

When I arrive I'm asked to sign a registration sheet that asks only for my signature, gender, and race. There will be no surprise as to the emphasis of tonight's discussion.

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"You still have deep-seated racial issues here in all areas."

"There is a complete racial divide in the [Interstate] 630 corridor downtown—the west side and the rest side."

"The problem we have is the white corporate male has not stopped fighting

the Civil War!”

These comments come about twenty minutes into the meeting in response to Dr. Tom’s question: “What are the issues the new Little Rock superintendent should be aware of to be able to hit the ground running?” For the seventeen blacks and seven whites in attendance (the white count includes me and two Arkansas helpmeets who have provided me with numerous local contacts), this is by far the most emotional and volatile portion of the evening. Dr. Tom’s request to hear “good things” about the district and “important qualifications” the new superintendent might possess have inspired only halfhearted replies or, in most cases, silence.

The solicitation to air grievances excites the crowd like a naked woman walking into a roomful of teenage boys.

The “white corporate male has not stopped fighting the Civil War” comment—which comes off as a pretty direct challenge to the very white-corporate-male-looking Dr. Tom—comes from a robust African American grandmother who prefaces her remark with the give-me-my-props note that she was a classmate of the Little Rock Nine, the supernaturally courageous African American students who in 1957 touched off a national desegregation shitstorm, defying Arkansas governor Orval Faubus and an Arkansas National Guard blockade by attempting to enroll in and enter Little Rock Central High School.

The Nine made it inside the school only after President Dwight Eisenhower intervened in the crisis, federalizing the Arkansas National Guard (thereby wresting it from Faubus’s control) and having the students escorted into the school by the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division, the outfit historically called into action for motherfucker missions such as parachuting behind enemy lines in Normandy on the night before D-Day. A nation watched transfixed while the spectacle of pig-hearted southern racism standing in the way of the ideal of public education for all played out live on network television. The event became the defining moment in Little Rock’s history.²

Dr. Tom has endured pretty much the same bellyaching about race at every meeting he’s done so far. Blunt community appraisals from the executive summary McPherson & Jacobson issues at the end of its 2011 superintendent search will include:

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“Little Rock is not a good place for black children.”

“A number of children have . . . parents who can’t read.”

“The whites bring their special needs children to the district but take the other students to private school.”

“We are losing students to charter schools.”

“There is a growing involvement of the faith-based community in schools.”

“Little Rock is the home of [the] 1957 crisis and some people are still in that place.”

“Re-segregation [is] taking place.”

“[The] system is sick and district is sick.”³

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My favorite comment from the J. A. Fair meeting—one that, sadly, will not end up in the executive summary—comes from an indignant African American man who stands up to express dismay that the current superintendent is not seen often enough at high school football games.

“The new superintendent should have concern for the student athlete and help them get good scholarships,” the man says with the emotional southern regard for the healing synergistic powers of higher education coupled with sixteen-year-olds who run like antelope and \$100 alumni handshakes.

Dr. Tom wants this meeting wrapped up on time. He keeps the discussion moving with the irritated, cut-you-off manner of a conservative talk-radio host. As soon as he senses a lengthy rant on the way he waves a hand and says, “Okay, let’s stay on topic,” or “That might be a good point, but it’s not relevant to this discussion.”

He doesn’t much seem to like his job or the people in the room. When he calls his occupation “a commitment, a calling,” the spiritual allusion feels manufactured for regional play with the crucifix crowd. His sour expression suggests that the only thing calling him are a couple leftover tabs of Pepcid AC back at the Days Inn. He’s a smart guy and I’m sure he’s got his own problems, but I dislike him and feel most of the people in the room share my feelings.

When the blessed end of the hour-plus forum arrives, I ignore the

McPherson & Jacobson largesse (store-bought cookies and liter bottles of diet pop) and instead circulate around the room, chatting up various participants. The funniest moment comes after I interview a chrome-domed, man's man type—an African American from Louisiana who is actually here as a McPherson & Jacobson consultant—and I ask the guy for his contact information. He grabs the pen and notebook out of my hand, flips to a blank page, and jots his email address: johnshaft1@[REDACTED].com

When I finally get a minute with Dr. Tom, I ask if the national search he's conducting is likely to land Little Rock the kind of top-quality administrator who might actually have a chance to fix the district's evident problems. He shakes his head, perhaps already envisioning the first drip of vodka Collins hitting his bloodstream in the Days Inn lounge.

"They're paying \$188,000 for the position," he says dismissively. "They should be paying about \$250,000."

Why Can't Johnny Reb Rede? Or Spel?

Beyond accusing them of being racists, the fastest way to get under a southerner's skin is to reference the bumpkin stupidity that southerners think the entire world believes them guilty of. Hypersensitivity to the issue of the alleged dimwittedness of locals is a trademark of the southern persona.

To deny the notion of widespread hillbilly retardation, the righteous southerner will point out that no matter how silly it is, a larruping accent isn't necessarily an accurate barometer of intelligence. He will also bray at length about the region's brilliant scholars and writers—a few can actually name one other than William Faulkner and Ronnie Van Zant—as well as the highfalutin success of such academic bulwarks as North Carolina's Research Triangle Park, a seven-thousand-acre R&D center and home to university laboratories, multinational corporate operations, and start-up companies.

The problem with this line of argument is that no matter how fair and judicious one might want to be in allowing the South its due regarding matters of academic distinction, the overwhelming empirical evidence describes a much less peachy narrative. That southerners have always been less well educated (this doesn't mean stupid, yet) than other Americans is as statistically reliable a fact as

the region also having the highest rates of obesity as well as the most homicides stemming from disputes over bass fishing territory.⁶

As clear as corn liquor, the historic achievement gap that has forever separated South from North has been scrupulously documented and remains a fixture of today's national education profile.

Explaining the scholastic inclinations of the Old South in *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash noted that “the South far overran the American average for (white) illiteracy . . . and that a very great segment of the [upper] class kept no book in their houses save only for the Bible.” The official 1860 white illiteracy figures were 17 percent in the South versus 6 percent in the North. According to University of Georgia history professor James Cobb, “Only 35 percent of the South's white children were enrolled in school in 1860 as compared to 72 percent outside the region, where the average school year was also 70 percent longer.” H. L. Mencken reported in 1917 that even the South's leading light of Virginia “spends less than half upon her common schools, per capita, than any Northern state spends.”⁵

While it's true that over the last half-century the South has pulled closer to national academic norms, the essential narrative of a southern region dragging down the nation's intellectual potential remains unchanged.

According to 2010 U.S. Census estimates, of the fifteen states with the lowest high school graduation rates, ten are in the South—eleven if you count Texas. No southern state appears in the top half of the rankings. Of the ten states with the fewest adults holding high school diplomas, seven are southern, eight if you count Texas. Per composite SAT/ACT scores, students in only two southern states score above the national average—and I'll be blowed if Tennessee and Kentucky ain't the two—though the rest of southern students languish nearer the bottom of the rankings. In a mild revelation to those new to national education statistics, upstart Arizona has recently displaced Mississippi with the lowest-testing kids in the nation.⁶

If you like, however, you can still beat Mississippi over the head as “dumbest state in the Union” by several measures, a compelling one being a 2006 report by Michael A. McDaniel of Virginia Commonwealth University assessing American IQ scores by state. In this ranking, Mississippi places brain-dead-last among all states. Not surprisingly, the South dominates the lower spectrum of

the list with ten of the bottom fifteen states, though it's worth noting that, led by slow-charging Arizona, the Southwest has recently been making impressive strides in poor schooling, with the Grand Canyon state, Nevada, and New Mexico all playing spoilers in the race for lowest IQ average.

No southern state places in the top fifteen for IQ and only one—Virginia at sixteen—sneaks above the national average. Take away Beltway Virginians and the state very likely plummets into the cerebral ghetto occupied by its Rebel brethren.

Yes, the McDaniel study is six years old, but I find it worthwhile not simply because it's unusual—it takes balls to pin IQ scores on states in which a number of citizens can't even fill out the form—but for using its data to connect brainpower with community behavior and public policy implications.

“The correlation matrix shows that estimated state IQ has positive correlations with gross state product, state health, and government effectiveness,” reads the study. “Estimated state IQ correlated inversely with violent crime. Thus, states with higher estimated state IQ have greater gross state product, citizens with better health, more effective state governments, and less violent crimes.”⁷

In other words, remove the South and the United States instantly becomes more intelligent, healthy, safe, and financially sound.

One of my favorite though admittedly obscure measures of intellectual vigor comes from StateMaster.com (a treasure of state-by-state statistical breakdowns). In its ranking of public library visits per capita, Alabama checks in last, with the usual southern suspects dominating the bottom fifteen with ten entries, eleven if you count Texas. Not a single southern state, not even Virginia, places in the top twenty-five for library patronage.⁸

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A number of factors play into the region's failure to attain educational equality with the rest of the country. These include religious dogma; a lingering, Confederate-odored, post-Reconstruction resistance to the system of free and universal public education that Yankee occupiers sought to impose upon the South; and, inevitably, racial inequality.

The main reason southern states fare so poorly in measures of education,

intelligence, and intellectual curiosity, however, is that the states themselves place such a low value on public schooling. This stubborn refusal to support public education is in large part due to what Diane Blair and Jay Barth call the “common southern view that education was ‘private, personal, and optional’ and not public responsibility,” in their book *Arkansas Politics and Government*.⁹

As was the case when Mencken was berating Virginia for its inadequate funding of schools, the historic norm remains fixed. According to U.S. Census Bureau figures released in 2011, southern states reflect their historic lack of commitment to education by doing less to gather funds for public education and collectively spending less on elementary and secondary public school students than any other part of the country.

This is particularly the case with property taxes, the traditional device through which funds for public schools are raised. The low property taxes Mark Potok from the Southern Poverty Law Center told me about in Alabama are consistent throughout the South. The average Arkansas property owner pays \$512 year in property taxes. In Louisiana, it’s \$643. In Kentucky, \$651. West Virginia, \$683. Tennessee, \$752. Compare that with states at the high end of the per capita property tax table—New Jersey (\$2,625), Wyoming (\$2,385), Connecticut (\$2,381), New Hampshire (\$2,317), New York (\$2,009)—and you start getting some insight into those low southern test scores.

No southern state, not even Virginia, spends above the national average of \$12,250 per year, per student. (New Yorkers spend the most on their kids’ education at \$20,645 per student, per year.) Even supposed federal-government-hating conservative states such as Louisiana manage to place relatively high (number 23 in annual student expenditures, at \$11,967 per student, second-highest among southern states, after Virginia) because they happily accept more in federal education funds than almost any other state in the country. Yet again putting the lie to the myth of plain folk self-sufficiency honored in recent country music anthems like “Way Out Here,” in which Josh Thompson proudly croaks of his dirt-floor kinfolk, “We won’t take a dime if we ain’t earned it, when it comes to weight brother we pull our own.”

Turns out, not only do southern ruralites take those dimes, they slack off and statistically *don’t* pull their weight once their snouts have been dragged out of the trough.¹⁰

The South's economic disregard for public education is incongruous with the rest of the country's determination to reestablish American schools as a standard-bearer for the world. The southern "approach" to education is nearly as dismal now as it ever was. The rest of us can no longer afford to drag the South's truant ass kicking and screaming into the world of twenty-first-century knowledge and discovery. Nor should we have to, given the way southerners take care of their own.

"When you compare test scores across the country and you look at Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, they are going to score in the lower part of the continuum and I think the culture of a state obviously has a distinct reflection on the education system," Dr. Tom tells me after the superintendent search in Little Rock is over. "I'm from Minnesota, a place where in any political election education is going to be one of the top three issues. It has to be about the kids.

"When we do work in the South it seems that students are not necessarily the number-one priority. A bunch of factors come into play before we talk about students."

"What factors?" I ask.

"Politics. Political motivations of board members seeking higher office. . . . This is a frustration of ours. When you go in and work with boards of education, you try to take them through a consensus decision-making process to focus on their top five or six criteria for what they are looking for in a new superintendent. For example, you might identify achievement issues, such as improving test scores or graduation rates. In all the meetings we did in Little Rock, I'm not sure those things were even mentioned."

Pride, Prejudice, and Cheetos-Infused Pickles at Forest Heights Middle School

I've come to Arkansas to give the South a fair shake on education.

Still beset by the dim stereotypes that resulted from the Little Rock Nine drama, and an unflattering 2007 HBO documentary, *Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later*, the state is, in fact, something of a rising star on the regional academic scene. Having taken more seriously than many the criminally impossible standards of achievement set by the federal government's 2002 No

Child Left Behind Act, the state's public school teachers have yoked their students into measurable improvement.

"When I left the state we ranked forty-eighth for student achievement," says Dr. Charles Hopson, superintendent of Pulaski County Special School District, which takes in the fringes of Little Rock. After twenty years working as a school administrator in Portland, Oregon, Hopson has recently returned to his native Arkansas. It was Dr. Tom's firm, McPherson & Jacobson, that recruited him for the Pulaski County job.

"We're now ranked tenth in the nation in terms of student achievement," he tells me.

A serious-minded, loquacious intellectual, Dr. Hopson is also a natty dresser with a knack for smooth talk. His "ranked tenth" proclamation isn't exactly accurate. In its annual "Quality Counts" report on state-level efforts to improve public education, *Education Week* magazine ranked Arkansas sixth in the nation in 2011, up from tenth in 2010, for "efforts to improve the teaching profession, their standards, assessments and accountability systems." Arkansas's actual students fell well below the national average in measures of academic achievement, rolling in at number thirty-six and getting a D grade in the report—not exactly what's known as a résumé builder in the education racket.¹¹

Still, thirty-six hardly makes Arkansas as deprived as Mississippi. And the state's increased emphasis on education is admirable. Gone, it would seem, are the days of 1921, when a state study concluded: "To [thousands of] children, to be born in Arkansas is a misfortune and an injustice from which they will never recover and upon which they will look back with bitterness when plunged, in adult life, into competition with children born in other states which are today providing more liberally for their children." Or even a 1978 study that reported, "By almost any standard the Arkansas system of education must be regarded as inadequate."

What's more, in Arkansas I'll mostly be giving a pass to the impoverished Delta Region, where the odd outsider can still wander around as I did for half an hour in towns such as Gould (population 1,129, median household income \$14,906), be harassed by small gangs of decidedly unsociable mongrel dogs, and encounter nary a schoolhouse nor a human being willing to point you in the direction of one. "Delta" often conjures romantic images—lazy floats down

bayou sloughs, ancient blues played on battered guitars from rustic wooden porches—but mostly it’s flat and plain and dull and lifeless and hotter than Satan’s taint sweat, a breeding ground for fourteen-year-old runaways who you wouldn’t have the heart to send home if they turned up in your town.¹²

In Little Rock, I’ve chosen to visit the largest, most generously funded, highest-achieving school districts in the state. There’s education money here, not just from the most affluent neighborhoods in Arkansas, but millions more from a 1989 federal court settlement stemming from desegregation battles that forced the state of Arkansas to pay about \$70 million a year to the Little Rock, North Little Rock, and Pulaski County school districts.¹³

If any place can disprove my prejudices of negligent education in the South, it should be Little Rock.

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First stop is Forest Heights Middle School, a large, single-story brick building spread across a hill filled with pretty, deciduous trees in a lower-income part of the city. Given that the school has been described to me as yet another Little Rock academy of despair—“Crime, fighting, drugs, discipline issues, nobody wants to send their kids there if they can help it,” an administrator at another Little Rock school tells me off the record—the school’s clean, smart exterior comes as a surprise.

I pull my rental car into the lot and park behind a beat-up Toyota Camry with an “Obama ’08” sticker in the back windshield, a clue, perhaps, as to why “nobody” wants to send their kids to Forest Heights.

Inside the main office I receive an effusive greeting from principal Wanda Ruffins and Charlotte Brown, the school’s literacy coach, parent facilitator, and the only black person I’ve ever met who hates Chris Rock. “His voice is so irritating!” Brown tells me.

Both women are smart, pretty, and impeccably put-together African American professionals. Both are products of Arkansas public schools. Both are outgoing and personable and accent their conservative businesswear with crucifix bling in the form of twinkle-y pendants and earrings.

“This school is 90 percent black, 80 percent of our kids receive free or reduced lunch, so we’re entitled to state and federal funds,” Ruffins tells me,

adding with evident pride (like nearly everyone I meet at the school) that Forest Heights “made AYP” last year.

To spend ten minutes in the company of anyone remotely connected to education is to become an instant student of the acronymic jargon of the trade. ACTAP. NSLA. M-to-M. CTA. This is the buzz lingo that greases the wheels of modern education-speak.

AYP is the most important acronym in any public school in America. It stands for Adequate Yearly Progress and it’s a measure of improvement in school test scores demanded by provisions in No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Schools that don’t meet annual AYP goals are deemed to be “failing” and eventually subject to a series of reformation measures that in some states can wind up with the schools being turned into charter schools—tax-supported schools that private groups take over and operate without having to observe many local and state education regulations.

In April 2011, U.S. education secretary Arne Duncan seemed to set the table for public school Armageddon when he announced that 80 percent of American schools are “failing” under the guidelines of NCLB. In Florida, only 14 percent of schools made their AYP goals for the year.

Education experts such as Diane Ravitch, a New York University professor of education and U.S. assistant secretary of education from 1991 to 1993 under George H. W. Bush, warn that AYP has set “a timetable for the demolition of public education in the United States.” The countdown will climax in 2014, when virtually all of the country’s public schools will meet the legal federal definition of failure, thus setting them up for potential private takeover.

The most intense opponents of NCLB will tell you that the law—originally drafted largely by George W. Bush’s Texas cronies and based on specious and now widely discredited achievement statistics of Texas students in the 1990s—was specifically designed to erode the power of public schools. The presumed intent was to diminish the role of “liberal” teachers in modern society and direct the vastly untapped market of private education into the hungry arms of soulless industrialists such as Rupert Murdoch. The ossified Aussified vulture is, in fact, becoming a major player in teacher union busting and the promotion and sales of Internet education. It’s a conspiracy theory that’s gained a surprising measure of adherents in public school circles.¹⁴

Arkansas, however, is playing the federal government's game, pushing its students and teachers to meet the nearly unattainable demands for improvement.

"The way we deliver education has changed," Principal Ruffins tells me. "We have a data board on every kid in the building. The board is divided into levels of proficiency. Every kid is tracked. Any time a kid fails a proficiency test, we look for root causes. We measure them every six weeks."

Jesus, talk about pressure. And surveillance! Junior high has become an even bigger gulag than when I went through it. No wonder so many kids get into drugs. It's a miracle they're not all junkies by the time they graduate.

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Charlotte Brown leads me through Forest Heights's halls to Mrs. Higgins's sixth grade English class. We take up positions in the back of the room. After the bell rings signaling the start of third period the students take their seats, barely noticing me.

"They're used to having classroom observers," Brown says. "People are here watching them all the time."

Of the seventeen students in the room, fifteen are black, two are white. Mrs. Higgins is a pleasant, energetic white woman in her early thirties with a bob haircut, yellow and black print shirt, and black pants.

The classroom is standard-issue public school chic: flat green wall-to-wall carpeting covering a big, dull square room with the teacher's desk in front of rows of plastic chairs with laminated wood desktops. Fluorescent lights. White acoustic tile ceiling. Walls covered with inspirational posters, student papers, and handmade art.

A large section called the "Word Wall" is filled with vocabulary words, which appear in long rows. The choice of words strikes me as needlessly confrontational in that aggressive southern style I've almost grown accustomed to by now.

Juvenile delinquent

Intimidate

Numerous

Desperate

Apologize	Staffer
Deserve	Traitor
Imitation	Obvious
Nazi	Generous
Outhouse	Deformed
Electrocute	Tolerate
Motivate	Torture
Overthrow	Temptation
Hostile	

Mrs. Higgins introduces an exercise called “reader’s theater,” in which each student reads aloud a piece of dialogue from an ensemble scene out of a workbook. The scene is about a school election, with various kids running for class officer positions.

A pair of high achievers named Montrel and Kyesha get the best and longest parts. They read their lines with thespian élan, getting laughs from classmates and nods of approval from Mrs. Higgins. The rest of the kids read between a range of “get me the fuck through this as fast as possible” monotone and stuttering embarrassment.

As a grade schooler, I always found “read aloud” exercises excruciating to sit through. Breezing through a paragraph or two and dropping back into my seat was never a problem for me. Then as now, however, I found the public struggles of other kids forming words such as “education” and “exceedingly” both heartbreaking and a waste of my time.

Nevertheless, there’s a positive vibe in Mrs. Higgins’s classroom. Later, I’ll chat with a couple of these kids at a lunch table with other students handpicked by Charlotte Brown. During this ad hoc “visiting old dude raps with the kids” session, I fire off a number of questions and get expected replies—“We hate the rule about keeping our shirts tucked in.” “This school has a lot of lazy teachers.” “Forest Heights has a bad reputation, we know what the rest of the schools think of us.”

For me, the major revelation concerns a local delicacy called hot Cheetos and pickles. No less an authority than student body president Tonisha Grimes

assures me this is a statewide favorite.

“You just stuff your Cheetos into a hollowed-out pickle and eat it,” Tonisha tells me. “It’s best with the Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, those are the ones everyone uses.”

About thirty minutes into her well-organized and largely peaceful class, the door to Mrs. Higgins’s room abruptly opens. Two unhappy African American boys and one scowling mulatto kid are escorted in by the vice principal. The boys shuffle sullenly to desks at the back of the room and drop down like bags of wet cement. After the VP leaves—not a moment too soon, I can’t help noticing—Mrs. Higgins reminds the threesome that they are not to sit next to each other. The boys mutter a response, then ignore several requests to split up.

Mrs. Higgins gets the rest of the class started on a team-reading exercise before returning to the malcontents and once more asking them to split up and read with different partners. The three don’t bother to respond.

Mrs. Higgins and Charlotte Brown know exactly what I’m doing here—writer, observer, note taker, a guy who can make their shit-reputation school look as bad as he wants to. Clearly, I’ve been brought to a classroom of “good kids”—and in fact the level of order and all-around scholarship I find across the board at Forest Heights strikes me as impressive, much better than expected—but the scene with the boys is an embarrassment. Classroom observers aren’t supposed to see this kind of disrespect for authority and, worse, authority’s impotent response. I feel uncomfortable for Mrs. Higgins and Charlotte Brown, but Mrs. Higgins keeps at it, demanding attention and work from the three boys. She’s got nerve.

The boys stare at their desks. One begins to doodle. The others do nothing in that genius way of doing nothing that kids have.

The rest of the class reads back and forth to each other. Mrs. Higgins walks around the room offering encouragement to various readers, but she keeps looking back to the three boys, painfully aware that she’s lost a standoff not just in front of me, but in front of the whole room. Suddenly Montrel, star of the class, the handsome, outgoing jokester, breaks ranks and begins clowning around with a piece of masking tape over his mouth.

The kids erupt with laughter and chatter. Mrs. Higgins tells Montrel to return to his seat. He complies, but takes his time getting there. Order won’t

ever be completely restored before Charlotte Brown and I move on.

Charter Schools, Christian Academies, Homeschooling, and Other Ways of Undermining Minority Education in the South

The library at Forest Heights Middle School is clean. Its shelves are stocked with books with bright, crisp covers. Two rows of new Dell computers cover a set of sturdy tables that run end to end for half the length of the room.

“We’re not lacking for state-of-the-art facilities,” librarian Ken Sutton tells me. “We’ve got a lot of extra money in Little Rock because we won the desegregation lawsuit. The state has had to pour \$4 million into this school.”

Sutton is a casual, approachable, white male in Nikes, faded jeans, light-colored T-shirt, and glasses. His thinning hair and graying beard reveal a man not far from retirement age. Even so, he still enjoys the busy library. Kids come in and out, flip through books, work on computers, and talk just on the cusp of a little too loudly.

“I run a reading motivation program here. We try to get kids to read twenty-five books a year on their level,” Sutton tells me. “For years, when black kids came into the library there were no books with African American characters in them. That’s changing.”

He points to a shelf filled with books from the “urban teen series” *Bluford High*.

“They love *Bluford High*,” Sutton says. “*Drama High* is another pop-lit series. It’s aimed at girls.”

He picks some *Drama High* titles off a rack: *Hustlin’*, *Keep it Movin’*, *Frenemies*.

“I don’t have to direct them to *Sweet Valley High* or some lily-white Nancy Drew thing anymore,” Sutton says. “This is just in the past ten years these series have come out. They’ve been a huge hit.”

You look at Sutton’s library—up-to-date, well managed, filled with energetic kids—and imagine a lot of community support backing it up.

The truth is more complicated.

Like many mostly black public schools in the South, Forest Heights Middle

School remains a whipping post for angry critics of public education. Many of these critics are proponents of charter schools who have abandoned the notion that quality public education is a viable cornerstone of the American promise. Across town, for example, strident courtroom appeals over that 1989 desegregation settlement continue even as kids check out *Bluford High* titles during lunch in the Forest Heights library.

A dangerous assault on the very idea of public education is taking place across the country, but it feels particularly virulent in the South. What kind of future society the defectors from the public school rolls envision I cannot say. However, having spent some time in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—a war-torn hellhole with one of those much coveted limited central governments, and, not coincidentally, a country in which fewer than half the school-age population goes to public school—I can say with certainty that I don’t want to live there.

“What scares me is that it used to never be okay to say you don’t care about public schools,” says Max Brantley, editor in chief of Little Rock’s weekly *Arkansas Times*, a man who has covered education in Arkansas for nearly thirty years. “Now it’s not only okay to say you don’t care about public schools, it’s okay even to be hostile toward them.

“Public schools have been the great leveler of America. They were our great achievement. Universal education for all. Now we’re ready to give up on all that.”

Brantley is a brassy, heavysset, triple-chinned, six-three, no-bullshit, old-style newspaper editor in a white shirt and tan slacks. He looks like an overweight high school basketball coach. I meet him in his downtown Little Rock office, an open-floor, exposed-brick loft affair cluttered with secondhand furniture, piles of notes and papers and manila folders, and stacks of boxes with dates like “91–92,” “95–96,” and “01–02” scrawled on the sides in faded Sharpie.

Brantley sits in front of an ancient Dell desktop computer big enough to give you a hernia just thinking about moving it. Next to it, a giant, circular Rolodex bursts with thousands of cards.

“It’s easy to demonize Little Rock because it’s a majority black district,” Brantley tells me. The district’s student population is 68 percent black. “White people will flee black people in the South. The suburban ethos is part of the

American narrative.”¹⁵

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Private schools and Christian academies—once known colloquially and more accurately across the South as “segregation academies”—are booming business in Little Rock and have been ever since popping up as legal ways for whites to get around the forced desegregation of the 1950s and 1960s. About 20 percent of Little Rock–area students now attend one of the metro area’s thirty-nine private schools, up from less than 6 percent in the 1990s. According to the Arkansas Non-Public School Accrediting Association, those private schools account for an economic impact of \$45 million. The largest private school in the area is Little Rock Christian Academy, which enrolled 1,327 K–12 students in 2011.¹⁶

Inspired by homeschool superstars such as Creation Museum founder Ken Ham, tens of thousands of other southern families have fled their public school systems in order to soak their children in the anti-intellectual sitz bath of religious denial. In Arkansas, many of these parents have found guidance in a rabble-rouser named Jerry Cox, a man who—wake me when this rerun is over—believes it’s his duty to prevent you from having the right to abortion or gay sex.

After leading a successful effort to prevent the use of Arkansas public funds for abortions, Cox spearheaded a successful statewide campaign in 2004 to amend the Arkansas constitution to define marriage as the union of one man and another human being with genetically provided mammalian protuberances, to borrow one from Frank Zappa. The way these fanatics carry on about the proper use of genitalia, you’d think Thou Shalt Not Wank and Your Junk Belongs To Me were two of the Ten Commandments. Given that a good number of “Christians” can’t name all ten, anyway, they might as well be.

Established in 1989 in association with James Dobson’s radical “Christian” Focus on the Family outfit, Jerry Cox’s Arkansas Education Alliance is the state’s largest homeschool organization. The Arkansas Education Alliance falls under the aegis of the Cox-founded Family Council, whose website declares that it is “dedicated to upholding traditional values in accordance with biblical principles.”

This means that a reasonable percentage of the 15,791 Arkansas children currently being homeschooled (the number has increased by an average of two

hundred to seven hundred students per year since 1986) may be on track to graduate from high school unburdened by any knowledge of evolution or other global scientific consensus that can't be shoehorned into the origin fantasy of Genesis or the method-up xenophobia and all-out genocide of Joshua.¹⁷

For those unfamiliar with this often overlooked gem of spiritual turpitude, the sharpened-stick murder sprees within Joshua include the indiscriminate slaughter of twelve thousand men and women (Joshua 8:25), roasting of a man on a fire (Joshua 11:11), hanging, baby killing, and city burning (pretty much all of [Chapters 8](#) and [10](#)), and some very pervy shit that goes down at a place called "hill of the foreskins" (Joshua 5:3). Critics of Bible-based ethics often focus their derision on the Dark Ages psychosis of Leviticus, but for unrelenting ammo to spray at KKKristian moralists, there's just as much madness and hypocrisy to mine in Joshua. (Tip for Ivy League education doctoral candidates: When searching for the headwaters of the southern achievement gap, try paddling up the river of biblical ignorance to the beachhead on which homeschool associations have established their modern-day confederacy of dunces.)

Most worrisome to the beleaguered local defenders of public schools, however, is that Little Rock is home to twelve of the state's seventeen taxpayer-supported charter schools. Each year, somewhere between 1 and 2 percent of Little Rock School District students transfer out of public schools into charter schools. Just as private institutions and homeschooling draw public resources, increasing enrollment in charter schools means less money each year allotted for those 68 percent black public schools. It also means that, more than ever, those public schools are populated with the least advantaged, most at-risk kids in the district.¹⁸

The most prominent of the charters, eStem Public Charter Schools, opened elementary, middle, and high schools under three separate charters in downtown Little Rock in 2008. The schools receive heavy financial and political backing from right-wing publishing magnate Walter Hussman, as well as the Walton Family Foundation, whose family founders have done fairly well with a little local business called Walmart. In the press and halls of legislature, Hussman and the Waltons have fashioned themselves as influential and bitter critics of Arkansas public schools and teacher unions.¹⁹

“The charter school movement is another big part of the problem,” says Brantley. “It’s being pushed hard by people like the Waltons and Hussmans who hate unions with every fiber of their being. A big part of charter schools is to bust unions. *Columbia Journalism Review* online did a piece on media coverage of the school reform movement. The money has co-opted the press without them knowing it. They get a free pass because they’re rich and rich people’s shit don’t stink.”

“Michelle Rhee’s whole narrative was built on crap; she lied,” Brantley says of the champion of school reform featured in the 2010 documentary *Waiting for Superman*. “The Waltons, Gates, Hussmans, the thing that drives me crazy is all the mega-studies show that charters on balance get the same results as public schools.”

Brantley is right about the studies, both nationally and in Little Rock. In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, her 2010 criticism of the current academic craze for performance testing, NYU prof Diane Ravitch cites study after study in smashing the myth that students in charter schools perform better on achievement tests than kids in public schools.²⁰

Charter schools aren’t unique to the South, but as Ravitch explained to me in an email, conservative states tend to respond most positively to their message. That makes the South prime ground for the further degradation of public schools.

In Little Rock, the tension between charter school advocates and public school teachers and administrators is regular front-page news. The toxicity of the debate is heightened by classic southern tinctures of union busting, congenital suspicion of the academic community, and, most corrosive of all, skin color.

“Desegregation isn’t working,” Ken Sutton tells me in the Forest Heights library, this more than fifty years after the federal government brought troops to Little Rock to enforce desegregation. “You can’t make people put their child in a school they don’t want them in. Little Rock has gone from mostly white to mostly black. I feel a little bit . . . (thoughtful pause) . . . I’m conservative but I feel like conservatives have abandoned the public schools for charter schools and private academies. They have no say here. It’s all liberals. No offense.”

“Why have conservatives quit on public schools?” I ask.

“We lost a lot of conservative evangelicals when it became common

knowledge that there were lesbian and homosexual teachers on staff. This has been going on ten years or so when they came out of the closet or whatever you want to call it.”

“I’m trying to pin some of these problems on a particularly backward southern outlook on education,” I say. “No offense.”

“I don’t know how much being in the South has to do with it. I don’t know. There’s still that, you know, black-white . . . it’s still an issue. I don’t know how to say it specifically, but it’s an issue.”

“What’s the issue exactly?”

“I was a librarian for an elementary school for two or three years. Two hundred and seventy kids. Two hundred and sixty-nine were black. Four-and five-year-olds. I had kids coming to me who had no concept of books. Didn’t know what a book was. Literally had never seen a book!

“So you start with a gap in kindergarten or first grade, they start behind. No parent reading to them at night. You’d be amazed at the significant percentage of parents that just don’t care that their kids are getting bad grades or get an F on a test.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of criminally disinterested white parents, as well,” I say.

“I used to be a ninth grade science teacher at a predominantly black school. Once, I asked how many African American students in here think I’m prejudiced toward you because I’m white and you’re black. Out of twenty-five kids, sixteen raised their hands. That’s the environment.”

The Return of Dr. Charles Hopson, a Red Lobster Feast, and the Never-Ending Crusade for Minority Equality

In a suburb across town from Forest Heights sits the headquarters of the Pulaski County Special School District, one of three districts that serve the Greater Little Rock area. Inside the nondescript office building, new superintendent Dr. Charles Hopson moves between rooms with purposeful yet unhurried strides. He interrupts meetings to take calls or read texts, motions silently to a secretary to bring him a file, and, like a savvy politician, finds a few minutes to shake

hands with every visitor, look them in the eye, and pay attention to their problems.

Dr. Hopson sees himself as a savior of education in the South, a visionary in a region famously lacking for vision. A rail-thin, charismatic African American who grew up in segregated Arkansas, he offers himself as a counternarrative to the common assumption of a system perpetually beating down the black man.

As Dr. Hopson will happily tell you, he applied himself in school, sweated through years of grad study, took advantage of the opportunity he'd earned, and moved to the green hills of the Pacific Northwest to help run schools for the children of enlightened whites. He enjoyed what he did in Portland, Oregon, so much that he decided to return to Arkansas armed with the kind of knowledge that will bring a brighter future—about which he is endlessly bullish—to his home state.

“I’ve had experiences in Oregon that, because of the liberal context there, allowed me to experience a global outlook and leadership that does not exist in this state,” Dr. Hopson tells me. “A few years ago I was involved in getting Portland public schools, K through post-secondary, to provide Mandarin Chinese and other global languages in schools. Coming back to Arkansas it felt like being in an episode of *Star Trek* where you have lived in the future and now you’ve gone back to the past.”

Not everyone is happy with Dr. Hopson’s methods for school reform, which include publicly confronting issues of race. One of the first topics Dr. Hopson thrust into the faces of his neighbors was the disproportionate disciplining of African American males.

Since taking command of his district, Dr. Hopson has been a controversial local figure. In the fifty minutes I sit across from him at the large, oval conference table in his spacious office, I get a sampling of the black-man-with-a-degree tautology that has unsettled a number of Little Rockheads.

“We are now fifty-five years past *Brown v. Board of Education* and you see segregation re-created to the degree that existed before *Brown v. Board* was enacted,” he says. “Systematically, we have re-created that.

“This new South we think has evolved is still rooted in the South of the past. We live in this illusory world where we think we’re getting along. We’re engaged in courageous conversations about race, but race is still at the heart of the Old

South. Until we confront its impact on the narratives and paradigm for systemic inequity so much will remain entrenched and continue to re-create the Old South paradigm. The plantation mentality still has roots that still play a vital role in our society, and covertly in other states.”

Ten minutes of exposure to Dr. Hopson’s academic blam-blam-blam is enough to reduce segregation deniers to the level of Amway salesmen. There remains in the South, however, a sizable percentage of citizens who simply refuse to acknowledge major problems with their schools.

In an astonishingly out-of-touch 2011 editorial that appeared in the Hussman-owned *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, the state’s largest newspaper, Andy Brack, president and chairman of South Carolina–based think tank Center for a Better South, described southern schools as something just short of a puppies-and-rainbows love fest. Brack’s Betty Crocker absurdities were pillowed out beneath the headline “My, How Things Have Changed.”

These days, students across the South attend integrated classes with white, brown and black students. Although some schools may be more white or black than others, integration is accepted and has become part of our culture—so much so that news stories of racism are considered abnormal. Today, a black family or professional can travel—even at night—without worrying about being refused a hotel room or a place at a restaurant’s table.²¹

Whoa! Even *at night* blacks can now travel in the South without worry of being lynched? I take everything back. I had no idea African Americans had it so cushy in the twenty-first century.

Several months before the publication of “My, How Things Have Changed,” I’d actually met Brack in Washington, D.C., following a session he’d moderated on environmentalism at a “Future of the South” symposium sponsored by Little Rock–based *Oxford American* magazine. Brack had begun his session by bounding onstage with a hearty “How y’all doing?” and demanding from the audience “a big ol’ amen!”

Brack seemed like a nice enough guy and he wasn’t completely delusional about his beloved South—“People in the South are scared to think outside the box,” he said—but I wish he could have attended the meal I had in Montgomery with two African American students from Alabama State University.

I’d met twenty-three-year-old Pierre at the Montgomery Embassy Suites,

where he was working as a valet. When he told me he was a senior working toward his education degree at Alabama State, I invited him to dinner after his shift was over. I told him I'd pick up the tab at any place in town he wanted to go.

We meet at a Red Lobster at six o'clock. Pierre brings along DeShawn, a thirty-year-old schoolteacher working on his doctorate, also at Alabama State. Over a Fisherman's Platter and Admiral's Feast, the pair describe school conditions throughout the South that mirror what I'd later find in Arkansas—though with much less funding.

"The naked truth is that high schools are segregated everywhere I've seen," Pierre tells me. "The only white kids in public high schools are the ones from the children's home or who are just plain poor. Most of the white kids in Selma go to private institutions."

"I've taught in Tuskegee, at a suburban school in Atlanta, and here in Montgomery," adds DeShawn. "It's not the kids' desire that is lacking, it's that the resources and public support aren't plentiful enough."

In a red Polo shirt and pressed jeans, clean-cut, smiling Pierre wouldn't look out of place onstage at Eddie Long's church in Georgia. DeShawn is his revolutionary counterpoint, a short, slithery customer who doesn't take off his sunglasses the entire time we're inside Red Lobster—he's clearly suspicious of my motives.

"All the hatred toward Obama down here, it's not racism, it's placism," DeShawn says. "Obama is acting out of his place. An African American Negro is not supposed to be carrying himself as if he's better than white folk."

DeShawn tells me he's from a single- and sometimes no-parent home.

"My mother and grandmother used and sold drugs," he says. "My brother is doing twenty-five to life for that same story line."

"Why didn't you end up like that?" I ask.

"I saw the mistakes my brother made. If you know what the bottom smells like, you put yourself in a better position."

DeShawn is a "reading and writing ed specialist" (this sounds like a fancy way of saying "English teacher," but I keep my smart mouth shut) who spits out ideas and opinions in bundles. He's a genuine example of a once common and now vanishing species known as the working-class intellectual, a blue-collar

champion who not only isn't afraid of books, but who embraces them with the religious conviction of self-improvement.

"Resources are our school's biggest plight," DeShawn says for the fourth or fifth time. "We can't compete in today's technical world with the resources we have to teach with and kids have to train with. Most of our kids have no computers. It minimizes everything we can do."

This mixture of frustration and hope I hear from educators—particularly African Americans—is consistent throughout my travels in the South.

"Old patterns of the South persist," Dr. Hopson tells me before I leave his Little Rock office. "But it's no longer valid to blame the oppression of the past for the failures of the present."

Dr. Hopson believes he is at the tip of a movement that will break the cycle of racism and close the regional and race-based achievement gaps. The problems he faces, however, seem so vast, too much a part of the DNA of the region. Having gone into our meeting thinking he might have the answers I've been searching for, or at least some optimism to impart, I end up shuffling out of Hopson's office feeling the prospects for change to be even more distant.

Dr. Hopson is intelligent and genuine and eager, and I wish him well. The man is trying. At the moment, though, he doesn't seem to have any more solutions than Pierre or DeShawn or the Waltons or Walter Hussman. Or even think tank dilettante Andy Brack, for that matter, who in Washington, D.C., memorably told me, "Fixing the South is like fixing a clunker—you know it's going to break down again."

African Americans' Second-Worst Enemy, and Closing the Best School in Biloxi

Given the obstacles it faces and the history that clings to its fabric like a cotton-eyed wraith, it's tempting for the liberal-minded out-of-towner to give the African American community a pass for its perpetual unwillingness to embrace education, and to accept as inevitable its sad fate at the bottom of the academic ladder. At that "Future of the South" symposium in D.C., I watched repeatedly as white speakers went to painstaking lengths to assure their audience that when they spoke about poor, uneducated southerners (i.e., blacks), they were being

neither condescending nor judgmental.

“Uneducated does not mean unintelligent,” they reminded the crowd, with academic condescension.

The trouble is, addressing southern academic inferiority in any honest way requires the well-intentioned whitey to flirt with racist stereotypes by admitting to generations of self-defeating behavior and egregious parenting by African Americans. And admitting that while the black community gives plenty of lip service to its sad lack of emphasis on education, on a large scale it does too little about it. More than just eerily reminiscent of W. J. Cash’s denunciation of Old South planters who didn’t keep a single book in their homes save the Bible, librarian Ken Sutton’s story about African American children arriving at school without any concept of what a book was is as woeful an illustration of the endless cycle of black neglect of education in the South as one might muster.

At the African American Wallace Creations barbershop in Laurens, South Carolina, Christopher Williams told me, “There’s a sad saying, I don’t know if you know it, but all of us here do: If you don’t want a black man to learn something, put it in a book.”

Horace Smith, the African American director of board development for the Arkansas School Boards Association, tells a story highlighting the same black indifference toward perfect margins.

“I did a tour of our local schools with education delegates from eleven African countries,” Smith tells me in his downtown Little Rock office. “They were appalled at how lazy and unmotivated our African American students were. These were education professionals in Africa. They could not believe that our students would complain to them about the amount of work they were expected to do, about studying, about the lack of materials. Can you imagine an American student sitting in front of a computer telling an African schoolteacher how tough he’s got it?”

Fatalistic attitudes aren’t the only thing that often make African Americans their own second-worst enemy. (If you can’t guess who’s number one, we’ll get there in a minute.) Segregated schools might have been created by whites, but blacks have very much helped re-create the pre-*Brown v. Board* conditions that prevail in Arkansas and other areas of the South.

In one of the most frustrating scenes from that damning HBO documentary

Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later, Minnijean Brown, one of the 1957 Little Rock Nine, visits a Central High classroom in 2006 only to discover that the room is neatly self-segregated on racial lines, all the whites sitting on one side, all the blacks sitting on the other. When she expresses horror over this arrangement —“My God, this room disturbs the hell out of me!”—it’s the black students who immediately challenge her by defending segregation as a matter of “personal comfort.” And it’s a black student who is shown sleeping through Brown’s emotional lecture recounting the Little Rock Nine’s struggles for equality in the 1950s.²²

Classroom apathy is an issue with all ethnic groups, but, not to get all Cosby here, should black students be more free of criticism than any other? Isn’t the culture of low expectations for African American achievement in some ways just as insidious as more overt forms of racism?

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The most outrageous accounts of incorrigible southern African American student behavior that I come across are from the Mississippi Teacher Corps. The MTC is a two-year program that recruits college graduates from around the country to teach in Mississippi schools, primarily in the African American Mississippi Delta. Wide-eyed liberal education majors are promised teacher certifications and “the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of students in one of the poorest areas of the country.”

To anyone over twenty-five, this sort of language is a dead giveaway to a term of deprivation and misery, but college grads are an endlessly naive bunch who believe that suffering will transform them into the kind of well-rounded human beings their suburban upbringings failed to make them.

The MTC’s website advertises an experience “modeled after the Peace Corps,” but the painfully honest Web postings from valiant young educators recoiling from a taste of Delta life suggests something closer to survival school on Parris Island.

Mixed with the usual grumbling about shabby facilities, underfunded programs, and local administrators phoning it in is some truly entertaining venom directed at the students themselves. Every child may be precious, but Delta children appear to be by far the least precious in the world, a group that

deserves not only the scorn heaped upon it in anonymous, three-martini teacher blogs, but the desperate adult lives of reeking poverty for which their lack of adolescent responsibility and crappy parents have set them up.

“My kids just bombed a really easy test and I’m glad,” writes one unrepentant young instructor, who seems to have given up pretty quickly on making a difference in the life of anything except perhaps a bottle of Jack Daniel’s. “They don’t ever do anything, and they deserve to have failed. . . . I take no responsibility for the lack of learning that’s happening here. I’ve done my job, am doing my job, and can’t do anything more. I know that now, so F*** You 75% of my students. I love you, but F*** you.”

“They threw my assignments on the floor,” moans another broken soldier. “I’m not allowed to give detentions until tomorrow. . . . I hate what I’m doing in this fairly large, encompassing sense. They threw paper towels at me behind my back in the restroom.”

“My district policy is a mandatory 80% pass rate on tests, and my Geometry classes had 28+ students in each,” cries another. “They don’t work. They don’t care. They copy other people’s work. They don’t study. If I force them to do their own work they don’t think on their own so I get driven completely f*** nuts doing and explaining everything. If I let them work in groups, no one works; no one does anything except the really motivated people, and everyone else just copies. They don’t learn anything, then the test scores are bad. If tests are too bad, I have to retest. They’ll fail on Monday because they won’t study the study guide. Or maybe they will. F*** this.”

Alarming as all this may sound to the lay observer, for anyone who has toiled a single day in the public schools trenches, it is pure cathartic gold.²³

But don’t think this sort of thing is confined to the impoverished backwaters. Every bit as sad as the Delta school blues is the report that came out in summer 2011 revealing that in order to raise its general competency test scores, principals and educators in nearly 80 percent of Atlanta Public Schools (which are three-quarters black and poor) didn’t even bother to retest. They simply falsely inflated their students’ scores.

Almost 180 principals and educators were involved in the cheating scandal that dated to 2001. Even so, months after news of the disgrace broke, the Atlanta school system’s official website was still touting itself as “one of the top-

performing urban school systems in America.”

“When students pass through our doors,” Atlanta Public Schools’ site read, “we give them the confidence, social skills and intellectual capacity required to successfully compete in college and in the global marketplace.”²⁴

• • •

And then, just when you’re about ready to call bullshit on every tired “white man keeping us down” excuse proffered by African American slackers, or roll your eyes at the Nat X militancy of scatterguns like DeShawn and his Jesse-esque “racism not placism” bon mots, you come across no-fucking-way stories about places like Nichols Elementary School in East Biloxi, Mississippi.

In 2010, the Biloxi Public School District voted to shut down Nichols and send all of its students to a lower-rated school for the 2011 academic year. This, despite the fact that Nichols was rated as Biloxi’s top-performing elementary school that year: it ranked sixteenth out of 432 public elementary schools in Mississippi, was the only Biloxi school to earn the state’s prestigious GreatSchools designation, and produced the state’s 2009 Teacher of the Year.

Each of the school board’s majority white members voted to close the school, citing budgetary concerns. Shuttering the city’s top school, it explained, would save the district \$400,000 a year. Despite public outcry, the board held firm to its decision, even when it was revealed that the school district was actually operating with a \$10 million surplus.

Nichols Elementary’s student body is—or, rather, was—90 percent black. The school is a landmark dating to 1886, the heart of a historic African American neighborhood, widely viewed as the social glue holding together a sense of pride and achievement within the East Biloxi community.

Livid, yet undeterred by the school board’s decision to close the school, African American and other activists went to work to find a solution. Rather than waiting for their Superman, they went looking for one. Superman appeared in the form of the Kellogg Foundation, which offered the school district a \$1.5 million grant to be paid out over three years, enough to keep Nichols in operation and out of the red.

The city’s highest achieving elementary school had been saved. Except for one thing. The school board refused to consider the Kellogg proposal. Their

decision was final. No further argument would be heard. Nichols was shut down for good at the conclusion of the 2010 school year.

“What kind of city closes its best school?” demanded an enraged Bill Stallworth, Biloxi’s only African American member of the City Council, a body with no legal power to overturn school board decisions.

When Stallworth contended that Nichols was closed “to make sure that white schools in this district never have to be embarrassed by being outperformed by a black school again,” it was difficult to reach any other conclusion. Uneducated may not always mean unintelligent, but as a great product of southern public schools once famously said, “Stupid is as stupid does.”²⁵

The same quote might be used to explain the conclusion of the search for a new superintendent in Little Rock.

Dickseedisfunkshun . . . But at Least the Floors Are Clean

In April 2011, after two and a half months of searching, Dr. Tom Jacobson forwarded to the Little Rock School District Board of Education the names of three candidates he and his executive recruitment firm of McPherson & Jacobson considered worthy of the position of superintendent of schools. The three finalists were a school superintendent from Springfield, Illinois, a deputy superintendent from Memphis, and the director of a school program targeting minority and low-income children in Seattle. Each was invited to travel to Little Rock in May to tour district facilities; meet with employees, parents, and students; and sit for a formal interview with the board.

Dr. Tom felt confident that each of the three fit the criteria he’d gathered from the exhaustive community meetings he’d chaired in Little Rock. Given their impressive collective experience with school reform, he believed any of the three would be up for the enormous task of repairing Little Rock schools. He was proud of the job he and his staff had done on behalf of the city. One night in Little Rock may have put Grand Funk Railroad in a haze, but Dr. Tom had kept his eyes on the prize, withstood multiple evenings of public outcry, and delivered a trio of committed, highly qualified candidates. Little Rock schools might yet have a shot at genuine reform.

On May 23, 2011, having taken the full measure of McPherson & Jacobson's eighty-three-page Stakeholder Input Report and the firm's candidate recommendations, the Little Rock school board announced its choice for new superintendent. He was Dr. Morris Holmes, the currently serving interim superintendent of the Little Rock School District, a local man who'd taken over when the previous superintendent had left the position before the end of her contract. In short, Little Rock rejected the recommendations of its consultant and did nothing to change the direction of the top post in its public education system.

Dr. Holmes gave a public address in which he outlined his strategic vision for Little Rock schools. Literacy and attendance would be his twin pillars of reform. Local media covered his mini-presser, but the news generated little attention and almost no public discussion.²⁶

"There was virtually no reaction to Morris's selection except some scattered warm words for a guy who is well known here and enjoys a generally positive reputation," Max Brantley of the *Arkansas Times* emailed me after the announcement. "The consultant money was wasted, in the end. Internal board politics forced them to turn to Holmes as a compromise choice. It's somewhat complicated to explain, but it's a mixture of racial and gender politics and settlement of old scores."

The three McPherson & Jacobson candidates vanished from the news, presumably to pursue careers in more reform-minded districts.

Following the announcement, I called Dr. Tom in Omaha to ask what had happened behind the curtains in Little Rock. On the phone, I found him far more relaxed than he'd been when we'd met at the public forum at J. A. Fair High School. We talked for almost forty-five minutes and had such a pleasant conversation that I started to feel crappy about writing those dickish little comments about him in my notebook several months earlier.

"Politics very much came into play," Dr. Tom told me about the Little Rock hiring. "We lost good candidates because the Little Rock board meetings are video-streamed on the Internet and a couple of our final candidates watched some board meetings and chose to withdraw themselves for consideration as a result of viewing."

"Based on what?" I asked.

Dr. Tom hesitated. The superintendent search is a matter of public record, but it's still a sensitive topic and he's got a business to protect.

"Let it just be said that they were able to watch the board in action and based on what they saw chose to withdraw their names from the selection process. When we got down to the end there was only one candidate willing to interview and they showed up for the interview and had a good interview. When we started this search we were told that Dr. Holmes was not a candidate."

I asked what he thought of the hire.

"It's probably the best solution they had at the time. It'll give them a chance to regroup for two years."

"Is it disappointing to do all that work and then have your recommendations go to waste?"

"It's extremely frustrating to put that much time and effort into a service and then have the people who purchased your service ignore what you are telling them and not listen to you. It doesn't happen often, but it's extremely frustrating."

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At about the same time as I was speaking with Dr. Tom, another mudcrusted shoe was dropping on Little Rock schools. In May 2011, a federal judge in Arkansas ordered the state to stop payment on most of the \$70 million in annual funds the city's three school districts had been awarded in that 1989 decision stemming from desegregation battles dating to the 1950s.

Explaining his unanticipated decision in a 110-page ruling, U.S. District Court judge Brian Miller, who is African American, declared that Little Rock schools were now successfully desegregated, as defined by the federal court, and, thus, no longer entitled to desegregation funds. In a somewhat contradictory comment, Judge Miller, a 2007 George W. Bush court nominee, said that the funds intended to end desegregation were actually serving as an incentive not to achieve desegregation.

The loss of the \$70 million immediately imperiled Little Rock's magnet schools and inter-district transfer programs, key components in efforts to bring minority and lower-income students into higher-performing schools.

"There is no way for the LRSD to adjust its budget to accommodate to [the]

loss of \$38 million,⁷ more than 10 percent of its total budget, without a substantial negative impact on the education of over 25,000 students,” Little Rock School District lawyers wrote in their appeal of the decision. “Teachers [will] have to be laid off and there is doubt the district could continue to operate magnet schools.”

In June, a higher federal court issued a stay on Judge Miller’s ruling, thereby allowing the desegregation funds temporarily to resume flowing into the districts, and bringing the promise that the school year would begin as planned in August. Nevertheless, Little Rock School Board president Melanie Fox acknowledged the certainty of bitter court battles to come in the nation’s longest-running desegregation case, telling the *Arkansas Times* that the district was already planning “for the eventual loss of the money.” You may be able to fight the status quo in the South, Fox seemed to be saying, but in the end, you know you ain’t gonna win.

As Professor Jay Barth of Little Rock–area Hendrix College told me, “I don’t think that much change happens over the long haul. State governments in the South have a lot of power.”²⁷

Incredibly, or perhaps predictably, depending on how much experience you have with southern education, the wheels kept coming off the old Little Rock schools clunker as spring baked into summer. On June 20, the Arkansas Department of Education moved to dissolve the entire Pulaski County Special School District and fired its crusading superintendent, Dr. Charles Hopson. The decision came after a legislative audit exposed a district in deep financial distress, due in part to more than a decade of mismanagement and a former high school principal’s involvement in a bribery scheme that most likely lost the district part of its share of that same \$70 million in desegregation funds.

Dr. Jerry Guess, a white administrator from Camden, about a hundred miles south of Little Rock, was handpicked by Arkansas education commissioner Tom Kimbrell to take over for Dr. Hopson.

“I have been an educator for thirty-four years in Arkansas, having spent thirty-three years in the same place, so I think I bring a message of stability,” Guess told a small gathering of media in his woodsy, rocking chair drawl, before laying out his immediate priorities for the upcoming school year. “Bus routes, textbooks, desks, making sure cafeterias are prepared, and floors are cleaned.”²⁸

In barely more than a month, Little Rock schools had scotched the recommendations of one of the largest executive search firms in the country; tentatively lost millions in funding; dissolved a district; ousted its most charismatic campaigner for school reform; and replaced him with a paragon of southern status quo who promised to keep the floors mopped. I wasn't close enough to the action to know whether Dr. Hopson bore any measure of guilt for his school district's financial woes, but speaking in confidence, every Little Rock administrator near the situation told me some version of the same story.

"Dysfunction is the name of the game on the local boards," said one. "They are deeply divided between what I'd call 'pro-public school and pro-teacher union' members aligned with many grassroots community leaders and especially the African American community, and 'pro-charter school and anti-teacher union' members aligned with the white business community."

"Hopson became a victim of political pressures from both a dysfunctional school board and a zealous legislative audit committee," emailed another. "He was directly confronting some racial issues that needed to be addressed. However, that made a number of people very uncomfortable and contributed to his demise."

"Dr. Hopson is a quality person, we did that search that found him," said Dr. Tom, who by now I'd come around to seeing as a brother in arms in the work to expose educational deficiencies in the South. "He was fired for absolutely political reasons and by political forces."

When I finally reach Dr. Hopson by phone, I find him as upbeat and talkative as ever. He's already got feelers out to school districts in several other states—some in the South—and is confident that his record in Little Rock will help him land another job.

"Ninety percent of what the state asked us to do, we did it, but there were other interests involved that stood to benefit from the district being placed under state control," he tells me. "You mainly have one faction of the district that wants to secede from the current district and this new arrangement helps forward their cause."

"Did your outspoken stance on issues related to race in Little Rock play into your dismissal?" I ask.

"The race factor did play into it. I was not a status quo superintendent.

When the board hired me I told them I was going to be a systemic equity leader and I was going to push for every student to be treated equally and it was going to be uncomfortable and it was going to be turbulent, but if we were able to stay the course we'd be better for it in the future."

"What was the toughest part of the year you were on the job?" I ask, impressed that a guy who just got very publicly canned doesn't sound sort of drunk. After getting fired from *Travelocity* magazine in 2001, I spent three contemplative months in my backyard listening to Belle and Sebastian and building a teahouse.

"For me it was the pain of looking at the inequality of the facilities and the way race and poverty were reliable predictors of the quality of facilities students had," Hopson says. "That was painful for me to witness and it became a moral imperative for me to take that on."

"What do you foresee for the future of students in Little Rock?"

"That is going to depend on the leadership. If the leadership is status quo, you're going to continue to get what you've gotten for the past thirty years."

"How does your experience in Arkansas compare with your experiences as an administrator in Oregon?"

"All boards have political elements everywhere you go, but what has happened with this board, there has been a southern flavor and context to how things happen in Arkansas.

"The sad thing is the students will suffer because, I will say it, the status quo is not working for black students in Arkansas. It is not working for white students in Arkansas. Our students have to be globally competitive and we're going to have to bring in opportunities and ideas from outside the borders of Arkansas so that those students are graduating with a global perspective and competitiveness that will allow them to excel for themselves and for this country. And the status quo here might not change for a long time."

Same as It Ever Was: Little Rock Central High School

Before leaving town, I pay a visit to Little Rock Central High School. Still a functioning school with approximately 2,400 students, Central High is also a

National Historic Site, part of the National Parks Service. This means the first place you stop when you visit is the one-story Park Service Visitors Center, which sits kitty-corner from the school.

It's a strange way to enter a school. A uniformed ranger greets you at the front desk, the same type of employee who might direct you to the bathrooms in the Smoky Mountains or tell you not to feed the elk in Yellowstone.

"Of almost four hundred properties in the national parks system service, this is the only working school that is also a national landmark," the ranger tells me, before scuttling off to wrangle a busload of shouting and shoving black elementary school field trippers who have just arrived from Memphis.

I wander around the visitors center checking out displays on the "Three Weeks in September" that put Little Rock on the world's shitlist in 1957: accent-drenched audio testimonials from locals involved in the Little Rock Nine drama; photos of U.S. Army troops wading through angry crowds; interpretive signage recounting the showdown between President Dwight Eisenhower and Arkansas governor Orval "Top Five Most Racist-Sounding Name Ever" Faubus; and black-and-white CBS News footage featuring an impressively hard-assed Mike Wallace reporting on the tumult and, phenomenally, looking and sounding not all that much different in 1957 than he did before he died in 2012. I'm going to go ahead right now and call Wallace the most underrated American journalist of the video age. Guy was a stone-cold, white-boy motherfucker long before Anderson Cooper got his hands on his first blow-dryer.

Statistically speaking, Little Rock Central High is today an exemplar of integration—the student body is approximately 54 percent black, 43 percent white. However, as most locals will tell you, and as Minnijean Brown discovered when she returned to the school in 2006, there are functionally two Centrals, one white, one black.²⁹

Few officials in the district are eager to acknowledge the "two Centrals" system, but the awkward truth pops up in all sorts of unexpected ways. In 2008, a minor controversy arose when the committee organizing the Class of '98's ten-year reunion fixed a cost of \$150 to attend the festivities. The ticket price effectively segregated the reunion between those who could afford to attend (whites, mostly) and those who could not (blacks, mostly). The back-and-forth

between the two camps became nasty—a “meltdown,” according to a former Central High student close to the situation.

Across the street from the visitors center, the large brown and white brick facade with towers, porticos, and Greek statuary makes Central High one of the most impressive high schools ever built in this country. Erected in 1926–27, the building itself is a commanding architectural testament to the civic centrality of education. Covering two city blocks and including 150,000 square feet of floor space, its imposing Collegiate Gothic style recalls flapper-era, art deco extravagance.

Inside, the school’s period charm is meticulously preserved. Classic schoolhouse-shade light fixtures hang from ceilings. Large gray clocks—literally, old school!—hang on the walls. Square floor tiles are waxed to a brilliant tea-colored shine. The huge auditorium looks like an old Hollywood theater, with heavy wooden seat backs and ornate touches around an expansive proscenium. An enormous trophy case is stuffed with ribbons and hardware, evidence of Central’s standing as the most prestigious academic and athletic high school in the state. No ankle-length wool skirts or ducktails are found roaming the halls, but students move between classes in the neat, orderly fashion of future community leaders.

I spend about twenty minutes inside the school—quite enough for me, I never really liked the oppressive vibe of these places—before heading back outside to take in the sharp spring air and vivid blue sky. With my back to the three sets of double doors at Central’s main entrance, I look over a small reflecting pool and manicured lawn to the gas station directly across the street.

It’s a gas station worth looking at—an immaculate, old-timey terra-cotta Mobil station painted white and crowned with red Spanish roof tiles. Like the school, every detail of the station has been lovingly preserved in its 1957 state, right down to the vintage red and white gas pumps with the old Pegasus logo below rotary pricer dials, and the large blue lettering above the service bay spelling “Mobilubrication.” Not a stroke of paint, not a blade of grass, is out of place.

Standing on the steps of a school surveying the place where one of the most emblematic events in the history of the South took place, you can’t help being impressed by the nostalgia of the scene. And the care and commitment the

people have taken to see that everything here remains exactly the same as it ever was.

“You’re Grounded . . . Forever!” The Scary Ramifications of Academic Failure

“Did you know that there are more people with genius IQs living in China than there are people of any kind living in the United States?”

Uttered by Jesse Eisenberg, playing Facebook cofounder Mark Zuckerberg, that line strikes the ominous opening note of 2010’s *The Social Network*, a movie that turns less upon the axis of social media than it does on the age-old human dread of being left crushed, broken, and humiliated by your former friends. (See also *Gone With the Wind*.)³⁰

Lurking behind all of the hand-wringing about test scores, charter schools, Mississippi elementary schools, and the ability of Arkansas sixth graders to impress the visiting northerner during sessions of reader’s theater, is a dark fear about the future of the country. The fear felt in all fifty states is typically expressed something like this: America is a declining power whose wealth, influence, and world leadership in the areas of commerce, politics, and all-around ass kicking face a mortal threat from ascending powers, upon whom the nation has become increasingly dependent for help with problems requiring technical or scientific solutions.

Chief among these threats is China—godless commies who have tricked us into emptying our national treasury in return for threadbare clothing, easily broken home appliances, chintzy trinkets, and iPhones (hey, at least we’re getting something cool out of the deal). It doesn’t help that the Chinese also happen to be better than us at things like math and capitalism, and in possession of terrifyingly motivated kids who probably now read more English-language books than our own. And with higher comprehension scores!

By out-mathing, out-computering, and out-fucking us—for by sheer dint of their billions the Chinese will inevitably demolish us, assuming their lead-based squirt guns don’t do the job first—Chinese ascendancy foretells the dismal end of our carefree lives of fifty-five-hour workweeks and shitty health care ameliorated by high-def TV coverage of preemptive predator drone strikes and

international wars that, to be glass half full, we still do rather well at producing, directing, and starring in.

In the face of this sort of synthesized media fearmongering, I'm generally able to keep my wits about me. I've recently spent some time in China and for all the irrational worry about that country "taking over the U.S.," it's comforting to remember that only on very rare occasions do established cultures ever get "taken over" by foreigners. The United States flattened Japan with two atomic bombs, rewrote its constitution, and occupied the country with its military, and sixty-some years later the Japanese are still eating sushi, dressing their schoolboys in quasi-military uniforms, and obsessing over godawful music squeaked out by prepubescent pop "idols" adored by fifteen-year-old girls and fifty-year-old men alike.

Even so, it'd be foolish to ignore the fact that dynasties fall and that it's never fun to be a part of one when that happens. I mean, who would you rather be, Mao Zedong or Chiang Kai-shek? Buster Douglas or Mike Tyson? Lady Gaga or whatever sparkle-titted, semi-talented, bondage-wear "maverick" hack in a conical bra that came before her captured our collective attention for forty-five minutes?

Unless we repair our rapidly Balkanizing education system, it's going to get harder each year to sustain the level of heating oil, air-conditioning, and spicy-nacho-meat-lover's-pizza consumption I've grown so attached to. I don't want the American Dream to die on my watch and I don't think it has to. Without a significant upgrade to our public education system, however, it very well might.

"It is clear from a demographic perspective that our future lies in our minority populations—success or failure in minority education means success or failure for the U.S."

These are the words of Dr. Steve Murdock, director of the U.S. Census Bureau from 2007 to 2009, former state demographer of Texas, and current professor of sociology at Rice University in Houston. I called Murdock to talk about the spooky prospect of the rapidly growing South educating a very large percentage of Americans in the coming decades. Murdock was willing to meet my southern paranoia only halfway. Still, coming from a Texan hearing criticism from a guy from Alaska, I felt like any concession to regional ineptitude constituted a small, personal victory.

“When you look at performance in education we’re simply not succeeding, more so in the South because there are more African Americans and Hispanics in the South,” Murdock said. “But African American and Hispanic education isn’t being done well anyplace in America on a large scale. Los Angeles, Chicago, New York. This is an American problem, not a southern problem.”

Murdock is right, education is a national problem, just like obesity, spiraling health care costs, and whatever hideous noncelebrity E! television is currently pumping into the national psyche. But after touring Little Rock schools and canvassing administrators, teachers, parents, students, and valets named Pierre across the South, I’ve come to the conclusion that the South is the least likely region of the country to solve the riddle of modern education. If you want to see the shadow that underperforming southern schools cast across the rest of country, take a trip to cities like Memphis or Little Rock and behold how much these places are arranged along the lines of Third World horror shows: wide streets lined with opulent, plantation-style homes sitting just around the block from apocalyptic Negro wastelands.

Because of its own self-defeating approach to the issue, the South simply won’t come to terms with the North over matters of education anytime soon. The recent attempts of visionary southern governors to break historic cycles of parsimony by adequately funding public schools emphasizes the point.

Progressive efforts to overhaul education by the likes of Arkansas governor Bill Clinton (in office 1979–81 and 1983–92), Mississippi governor Ray Mabus (1988–92), and Alabama governor Bob Riley (2003–11) all failed before the immutable “political realities [that] put roadblocks in front of virtually any effort to raise money for the schools, outside of the regressive mechanism of a sales tax increase,” to quote the 2011 book *Taxing the Poor* by Katherine J. Newman and Rourke L. O’Brien. In Arkansas, Clinton’s experience was nothing new, reminiscent as it was of failed efforts at sweeping education reform by territorial governor John Pope in 1833 and governor Sidney McMath in 1949, among others.³¹

Southern states simply do not believe in funding education to the extent that northern states do. That’s not a value judgment or insult—it’s documented fact. The difference this makes in the ongoing concerns of society are enormous; the gulf it creates, significant. Unless we’re willing to separate ourselves from our

lowest common academic denominator, we'll forever be a nation sitting around waiting for the slowest kid in the class to catch up. Or at least learn to properly enunciate "education."