

## Septima Clark, Black Schools in the Jim Crow South

The NAACP campaign against segregated schools was motivated by the deplorable condition of public education for African Americans in the South. In the following document, Septima Clark (1898–1987) describes the horrible inequalities she witnessed while teaching in a black school on Johns Island, South Carolina, as a young woman. Fired in 1956 from a position in the nearby Charleston school system for being a member of the NAACP, she devoted the remainder of her life to the fight for civil rights.\*

Here I was, a high-school graduate, eighteen years old, principal in a two-teacher school with 132 pupils ranging from beginners to eighth graders, with no teaching experience, a schoolhouse constructed of boards running up and down, with no slats in the cracks, and a fireplace at one end of the room that cooked the pupils immediately in front of it but allowed those in the rear to shiver and freeze on their uncomfortable, hard, back-breaking benches. . . .

I had the older children, roughly the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades. The other teacher had those through the fourth. But my pupils in the seventh and eighth grades . . . were most erratic in their attendance, for they were old enough to work in the fields. They didn't come in until the cotton had been picked, and often it was Christmas and sometimes even January before all the cotton was gleaned. To add to this difficulty, most of the children had to stop school in early spring to begin preparing the fields for the new crop. Naturally, the attendance varied greatly from day to day.

We tried as best we could to classify these children. But it was difficult. Some subjects I was able to teach most of them at the same time, and so was the other teacher; we could make better time that way. But there were subjects that required almost individual teaching. Another problem was the lack of textbooks. There were so few, and what we had were not uniform. In the spelling classes, I remember, I often wrote out lists of words to be studied. . . .

In those days the state financed the schools, but sometimes the counties provided small supplements and Charleston County was one of them. Soon I was getting a supplement of five dollars, which made my salary \$35 a month. But right across from me—it happened that the white school and Negro school in this community were not far apart—was the white teacher getting \$85 a month and teaching three—yes, three—pupils.

It wasn't fair, of course; it was the rankest discrimination.

\* Septima Clark, *Echo in My Soul* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1962).