

The Klan's involvement with public education was not about segregated schools: The real story about the KKK and IPS

But, it wasn't the Klan who created Crispus Attucks High School.

-- Narrator, 5:20 mark of [Attucks: A school that opened a city](#)

The key to understanding the Klan and segregation...is to understand that Klan politicians were far more interested in patronage and power than ideology...the Klan and segregationist movements...were, [mainly] independent of each other. The decision to segregate the public schools was made in 1922 by the board of the Citizen School Committee at the urging of not only the white neighborhood protection associations, but also the Chamber of Commerce and other business groups that backed the citizen's board. The segregation program did not depend on the Klan support and would have been carried out had the Klan never existed.

-- Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, p. 150

Not until many years later, after the state law that abolished school segregation was adopted in 1949 and "establishment" whites wanted to remove the stigma of racism represented by segregated schools, it's a tradition developed that the Klan was responsible for Crispus Attucks high school.

-- Dr. Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks In the 20st Century*, p. 60

Named after Crispus Attucks...the school opened in September 1927, but from the foregoing account it is clear that the decisions to develop a Black high school...were made by the school board elected in 1921. The so-called "Klan" board was not elected until November 1925. These facts refute the popular tradition that the "Klan" board was responsible for authorizing a segregated high school.

-- Dr. Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks In the 20st Century*, p. 58

The completion of [Attucks] during the Klan reign, along with the attempt by the Klan city council to enact the [1926] residential segregation order ordinance, led to a pervasively belief in later years that the segregation campaign of the 1920s grew out of the Klan movement and was implemented primarily by Klan politicians. While the claim made an excellent scapegoat for later generations of politicians attempting to justify decades of legally sanctioned discrimination, this was simply not the case...

-- Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, p.149-150

In the end, the Klan was merely one of the architects of Indianapolis's segregated schools. The policy of segregation was instituted before Klan-supported candidates took office, continued while they were in position, and was maintained after they were ostensibly removed from the school board. The simple but unpopular explanation is that the majority of white voters wanted segregated schools. Faced with a seemingly ever-increasing black population, whites created formal, structural barriers.

-- Dr. Richard Pierce, *Polite Protest: The political economy of race in Indianapolis 1920 to 1970*, p. 31

“The import exceptions were that leading businessmen and other economic elites did not join [the Klan].”

~ Dr. Leonard Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, p 141

“The [residential] segregation campaign predated the Klan’s emergence as a force in the city.”

~ Dr. Leonard Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, p 144

Shortly after taking office in 1926, the new Klan councilmen passed a residential segregation ordinance that gave white citizens the right to exclude black families from their neighborhood. The ordinance was overturned by the courts and never put into effect, but its passage represented a clear example of the racist sympathies of the Klan councilman.

One of the most significant and perhaps ironic aspects of the residential segregation order episode was the relatively small role it played in the larger context of the Klan involvement in local politics.

The segregation campaign predated the Klan’s emergence as a force in the city. First directed at the public schools, it resulted in a reorganize elementary schools along school that all black students would

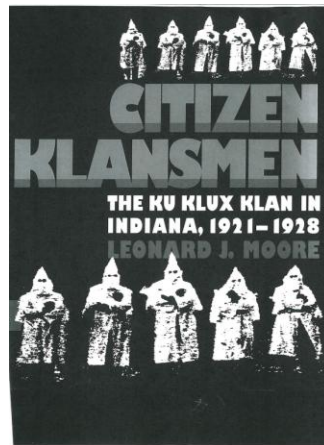
The attempt to extend a legally residents in 1926 was the next step in something new, and actually controversy among the white citizens. [law], it had not been an important weighty debate between Klan and

Other issues, in fact, engendered a [was] the Klan’s assault on the city’s Republican machine and the battle over patronage ensuing once the Klan [was in power].

The other issue--by far the biggest of the election--involved the public schools, but had nothing to do with racial segregation. Instead, it centered on the Klan’s support for a widely supported school building and modernization program, and the refusal of school officials to get it underway.

While the election thrust Klan factions into a struggle for power at city hall, it had also achieved something more substantial. Along with...the new city council, the Klan had elected a slate of candidates for the IPS board. Their election had been the central issue other campaign and the focus of a bitter struggle between a powerful group of business leaders and the Klan...over who would control [the public affairs of Indianapolis: the Klan or the business elites of the Chamber of Commerce and the Republican Party].

Since the end of World War I, the city of Indianapolis had been engaged in a protracted debate over conditions in its public schools. Newspapers and civic groups had criticized the overcrowded classrooms as well as poor heating, ventilation, and plumbing, outdoor toilets, broken windows, and other indications of disrepair. In 1921 and again in 1923, the voters passed bond measures intended to finance a building program. The program was to include the repair and modernization of existing buildings and the construction of two or perhaps three new high schools, six new elementary schools, and a number of other new classroom buildings. In [October] 1921, in the midst of enthusiasm for the building program, a number of business leaders organized the Citizen's School Committee and offered a slate of candidates for the Board of School Commissioners who would "establish sound



decision by school officials in 1922 to racial lines and build a new high be required to attend.

sanctioned system of segregation of the ongoing campaign, rather than generated relatively little While Klan politicians supported the campaign issue or the subject of (white) anti-Klan forces.

good deal more political strife. One

management and efficiency" in a school administration that was perceived by the public as poorly run. While the [Citizens School Committee] board won election by giving the impression that it supported the building program, over the next 4 years it demonstrated instead a determined commitment to hold down expenditures for the schools and generally block the building program.

The campaign against the building program was carried out by the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, the Indiana Taxpayers Association, their allies on the school board and other supporters in state and local government, and the *Indianapolis News*. The first blow came when the state tax board refused to approve the 1921 school bond after the voters had passed it. Then in 1922 and 1923, the board members of the Citizens School Committee worked to block other attempts to raise revenues and to postpone decisions about plans for the new school buildings. Further delays grew out of a rupture within the citizen's committee's ranks early in 1923. Two of the school commissioners who had been elected with the committee's support defected and upset the balance of power on the board. In response, the Chamber of Commerce Education Committee issued a report attacking several of the new building designs for their "extravagance" and pointing to various other examples of waste and inefficiency in the schools. One of its recommendations called for the resignation or impeachment of the two "traitorous" commissioners and another who had joined with them in opposing the Citizens School Committee. The besieged commissioners refused to resign and vigorously defended the building plans in the press. One commissioner, Dr. Marie Halsep, revealed that from the beginning of her term she had been under pressure to oppose the building program and support the position of the citizen's committee and the *Indianapolis News*. "I was warned that I must obey the News," she told a reporter. "One person told me 'if you do as the *Indianapolis News* says, your time on the board will be pleasant. If you do not, then watch out.'"

The city's 2 other major newspapers rushed to defend the school board from the criticisms leveled by the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. The [*Indianapolis*] *Times* and the *Star* both concluded that the problems in the city schools could not be blamed on school board mismanagement. They criticized the report as unfairly biased against the building program, since 2 of the committee members had also sat on the state tax board, which had undercut the 1921 school bond, and 2 other members were employees of the *Indianapolis News*. Faced with growing opposition--and with another school bond election just one month away--the Chamber of Commerce softened its position, stating that it would no longer oppose the building program so long as board members agreed to consult "civic bodies" before making major decisions.

Klan's involvement with IPS was with the district's building program, not segregation

The Klan's involvement in the school controversy began with the 1923 school bond referendum. As the March election date approached, the [Klan's] *Fiery Cross* [newspaper] printed a series of stories on conditions in the city schools and the opposition to the building program ["KKK Plan to Throttle Indianapolis Schools Conclusively Shown" <http://bl-libg-doghill.ads.iu.edu/gpd-web/fierycross/1923216/1923216.pdf>].

The Klan newspaper pointed to the "outside toilets, old stoves, stench and filth and revolting conditions" and reminded its readers that previous attempts to finance the building program had been undermined. The main culprit was the president of the IPS Board of School Commissioners, Charles W. Barry. Much of the criticism of Barry, a Roman Catholic, came in the form of traditional Klan anti-Catholicism. The *Fiery Cross* concocted a number of schemes whereby Catholic bishops were directing Barry to undermine Indianapolis's public schools. At the same time, however, it made

more valid criticisms of the opposition to the building program that came from the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, the Indiana Tax Board, and the *Indianapolis News*. When voters passed the school bond, the Klan newspaper declared in a front page headline: "Sure They Want More Schools."

When the IPS board came up for reelection in 1925, the Klan led the fight against the Citizens School Committee. Five candidates, all backed by the Klan and all pledged to endorse the building program, organized as the Protestant School Ticket. By the time of the election, the citizen's committee and its supporters realized that public support for the building program was too strong to be [fully] thwarted.

Some of the new elementary school buildings had been constructed in 1924, and as the [November] election drew near in 1925, the school board broke ground for 2 of the new high schools and announced that it had agreed on the plans for constructing the Shortridge HS (the land for which had been purchased more than 5 years earlier). But the citizen committee's change in policy came too late to satisfy the voters. All of the Klan's school board candidates were elected, and despite continued resistance from business interests, they presided over the completion of 3 new high schools [Washington, Shortridge, and Attucks] and several new elementary schools.

One of the high schools finished by the Klan school board was racially segregated Crispus Attucks, located in northwestern Indianapolis. The completion of the school during the Klan's reign, along with the attempt by the Klan city council to enact the [1926] residential segregation ordinance, led to a pervasive belief in later years that the segregation campaign of the 1920s grew out of the Klan movement and was implemented primarily by Klan politicians.

- While the Klan made an excellent scapegoat for later generations of politicians attempting to justify decades of legally sanctioned discrimination, this simply was not the case—despite the fact that the hooded order was a natural home for activists in the segregation campaign and Klan leaders did their part to promote it.
- The key to understanding segregation and the Klan in Indianapolis is to recognize, first, that Klan politicians were far more interested in patronage and power than they were in ideology and, second, that the Klan and segregation movements were, for the most part, independent of each other.
- The decision to segregate the public schools was made in 1922 by the board of the Citizens School Committee at the urging of not only the white neighborhood protection associations [White Supremacy League, White People's Protective League and the Capital Avenue Protective Association] but also the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce and other business groups that backed the citizen's board.

The segregation program did not depend on the Klan's support and would have been carried out had the Klan never existed.

- The real source of controversy was the building program, not segregation. During the 1920s, there were many vehicles for racial prejudice in Indianapolis; the Klan, however, represented one of the few vehicles to challenge the power of commercial business elites in city politics [e.g., the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce].

From *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928*. Dr. Leonard Moore, pp 144-150.
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