

# School Integration

1868  
–  
1874

While a handful of private schools served black children in New Orleans prior to the civil war, and more opened under Union occupation after 1862, the vast majority of the city's black children had no access to education until the establishment of Negro schools in October 1863.

By December 1864, more than 3,200 students were enrolled, but with City officials refusing to appropriate funds to the black schools and white voters in the majority, the schools were struggling by 1867. Under the protection of Federal troops, black voters were the majority statewide, and as white political coalitions pursued black votes, by negotiating with a well-established creole elite and emerging black leadership, they were forced to make major concessions in recognizing black civil rights. Consequently, the state constitutional convention of 1867 prohibited the establishment of separate schools and barred any public school from denying admission on the basis of race or color.

In the initial reaction to the first year of integration, overall enrollment dropped from 24,892 students to 19,091, but it soon rebounded and rose steadily to 26,251 by 1875. The return of white students and growth in black enrollment were both aided by excellent instruction and high academic standing in the mixed schools. The Fillmore School in the Third District, for example, had over a quarter black students by 1871 and grew from under 400 students that year to 890 in 1874, with more of its students qualifying for high school by competitive exam than any other school in the city. The broader context for excellence was less positive; mixed schools were categorized as Grammar A schools, which received more funding, allowing them to hire more teachers at a higher salary scale. Most of the Negro schools were categorized as Grammar B schools, perpetually underfunded and understaffed, and “the poorest in quarters, furniture, text-books, and in every way.”

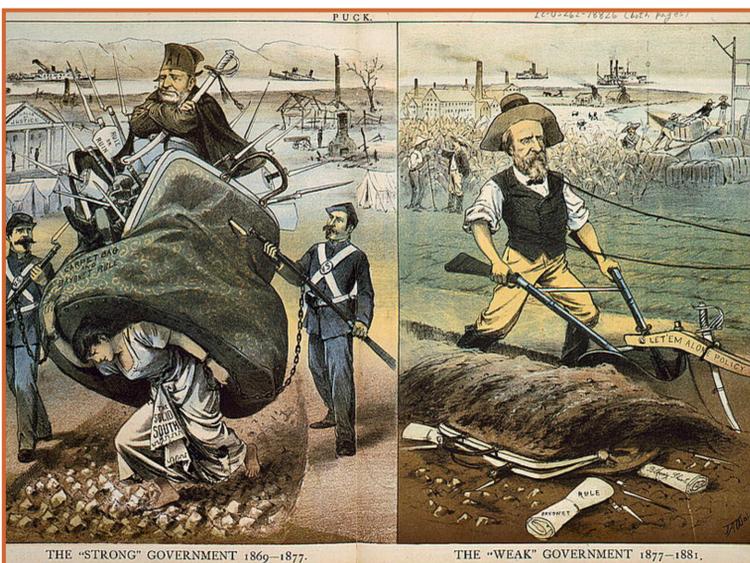


Illustration in "Puck" from 1880 depicting "The 'Strong' Government" of Reconstruction and "The 'Weak' Government" after its failure. Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The New Orleans school system would integrate fully in December 1870, undertaking the first experiment in school integration in the South. Initially, fierce opposition was encouraged by many white newspapers in the city, especially *The Bulletin*, which came perilously close to endorsing violence in its pages. On the whole, however, resistance took the form of evasion, with students walking out and parents removing their children from school in a reactionary exodus of white families to new or expanding parochial schools. Robert Mills Lusher, former state superintendent of schools, stepped down from his post to lead the segregationist Peabody Education Fund. In that role, Lusher attempted to organize a system of private schools in which white pupils would be, “properly prepared to maintain the supremacy of the white race.” The plan failed for lack of funding, as white parents quickly tired of paying for their prejudice and within a few years began returning to the integrated public schools.

## Sources

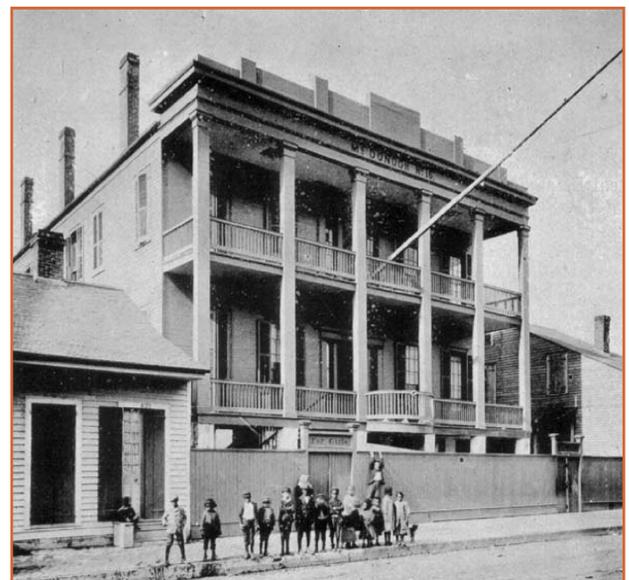
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McDonough School #16, formerly The Fillmore School until 1891. Source: New Orleans Public Library.

In December 1874, however, the New Orleans branch of the White League, regrouping from its temporary victory and reversal at the Battle of Liberty Place, developed a strategy to destroy integrated education in New Orleans. The strategy began with a demonstration at Upper Girls High School, after which a mob of white men attacked superintendent C. W. Boothby for “insulting” the girls, and forced him to sign a pledge opposing integration. From December 16 to 19, gangs of hundreds of white boys, backed by grown men and supported by the White League, roamed the streets, forcing their way into schools and violently expelling black students. Armed black parents began marching to the schools to protect their children, but were met with the gangs of ‘boy regulators.’ The two groups fought pitched battles with parents on school grounds before the school board shut all of the schools on December 20. Despite this violent interruption, integrated schools would reopen and remain open until the state constitution was rewritten in 1879 to allow separate schools, and again in 1898 to require them.