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ProPublica has identified 20 schools in Mississippi that likely opened as segregation academies in the 1960's and have received funds in recent years from the state's tax credit donation program.

The attached November 22 ProPublica article is a reminder that subsequent to the Brown Decision certain states used vouchers to avoid integration of public schools. Today, some of the same private schools are using public funds to essentially continue segregation. One of the five claims in the Vouchers Hurt Ohio lawsuit is that the EdChoice vouchers scheme adds to segregation via state policy and funding.

Segregation Academies in Mississippi Are Benefiting From Public Dollars, as They Did in the 1960s

ProPublica identified 20 schools in the state that likely opened as segregation academies and have received almost $10 million over the past six years from the state's tax credit donation program.

by Jennifer Berry Hawes and Mollie Simon Nov. 22, 6 a.m. EST

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On May 14, the final day for submitting new bills in the Mississippi Legislature, a bold new package of them landed on the desks of Mississippi lawmakers. The plans called for the creation of a voucher program that paid for students to attend private schools.

A few weeks later, in the heat of mid-June, the governor urged lawmakers to support the $40 million program, promising it "will bear the sound fruit of progress for a hundred years after this generation is gone." Public school support would continue, he assured. But vouchers would "strengthen the total educational effort" by giving children "the right to choose the educational environment they desire."

It was 1964.

Key backers of the move included a group of white segregationists that had formed after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled state-mandated public school segregation unconstitutional.

Across the South, courts had already rejected or limited similar voucher plans in Alabama, Louisiana, Virginia and Arkansas. But Mississippi lawmakers plowed forward anyway and adopted the program. For several years, the state funneled money to white families eager for their children to attend new private academies opening as the first Black children arrived in previously all-white public schools.

Now, 60 years later, ProPublica has found that many of these private schools, known as "segregation academies," still operate across the South — and many are once again benefiting from public dollars. Earlier this week, ProPublica reported that in North Carolina alone, 39 of them have received tens of millions in voucher money. In Mississippi, we identified 20 schools that likely opened as segregation academies and have received almost $10 million over the past six years from the state's tax credit donation program.

At least eight of the 20 schools opened with an early boost from vouchers in the 1960s.

"The origins of private schools receiving public funds were with the segregation academies," said Steve Suitts, a historian and the author of "Overturning Brown: The Segregationist Legacy of the Modern School Choice Movement."

Most private schools receiving money from the voucher-style programs exploding across the country aren't segregation academies. But where the academies operate, especially in rural areas, they often foster racial separation in schools and, as a result, across entire communities.

Despite the passage of decades, most segregation academies across Mississippi remain vastly white — far more so than the counties where they operate, federal private school surveys show. Mississippi is the state with the highest percentage of Black residents.

At 15 of the 20 academies benefiting from the tax credit program, student bodies were at least 85% white as of the last federal private school survey, for the 2021-22 school year. And among the 20, enrollments at five were more than 60 percentage points whiter than their communities. Another 11 were at least 30 percentage points whiter.

In 1964, the White Citizens' Council was among those pushing for the voucher plan. The pro-segregation group was founded in the Mississippi Delta town of Indianola in the 1950s by Robert "Tut" Patterson, who sought to "save our schools if possible" from integration and "if that failed, to develop a system of private schools for our children."

For Patterson, it was personal. His family, including a young daughter who would start school that fall, lived on what he called a "plantation" with 35 Black families. As he later told an interviewer, "We took care of them. We practically lived with them. We loved them. We tended to them, but I didn't want to mingle my children with them."

The state's voucher program provided $185 to each student to help pay private school tuition — about $1,876 in today's dollars. It aimed to give each child "individual freedom in choosing public or private schooling," the bill's preamble said.

Shortly after lawmakers adopted the plan, the Citizens' Councils of America used its monthly journal to follow up with advice about "How To Start A Private School" and a "Sample Charter Of Incorporation." Private schools sprouted up, particularly in public school districts under court desegregation orders or that had submitted voluntary desegregation plans to the federal government, court records show.

Over the voucher program's first four years, the number of new segregation academies that received public dollars snowballed from two to 49. Among them, 48 enrolled no Black students. One did admit Black children — but only Black children.

John Giggie, a historian at the University of Alabama, directs its Summersell Center for the Study of the South and has studied the birth of these private schools. These days, people often "have no idea why these segregation academies opened," he said. "It was one of the most aggressive moves that Southern governors took after the passage of the Brown case. That movement accelerated as the Civil Rights movement accelerated. It ripped across the region."

As white families rushed to open academies, vouchers provided critical seed money. In the 1965-66 school year, vouchers covered more than a third of the total operating costs for at least 17 new academies.

One of the early takers was Central Holmes Academy, now Central Holmes Christian School. Vouchers paid more than 78% of the fledgling academy's tuition bills for 210 students that school year. The school's directors made their feelings about integration clear in a letter later cited in federal court in which they described "other schools" as "intolerable and repugnant."

In 1968, Mississippi lawmakers increased each voucher to $240. The following January, Black families in Mississippi prevailed in a federal class-action lawsuit against the state challenging the vouchers' constitutionality. A panel of federal judges found that the program supported "the establishment of a system of private schools operated on a racially segregated basis as an alternative available to white students seeking to avoid desegregated public schools."

The program violated the Constitution, the judges ruled. Parents could choose segregated private schools for their children — but the voucher program involved the state in that discrimination.

In a way, it was too late. The academies were up and running.

“Clearly, the schools could not have survived as even semblances of educational institutions without these contributions,” the U.S. Department of Justice found after examining the academies’ finances as part of the federal lawsuit.

By then, state taxpayers had funded more than 5,000 vouchers.

The segregation academies continued for a time to receive other forms of public aid, including state-financed textbooks, deals on property and donations of public school equipment. But vouchers were dead.

Then, five decades after the court tossed its early voucher program, Mississippi’s Legislature found a way to reestablish private school funding.

In 2019, the state launched its Children’s Promise Act, which provides incentives to businesses to participate in a state-funded program for private schools. The program gives businesses a dollar-for-dollar tax credit — up to 50% of their total tax liability — for donations to certain educational charities, including private schools. The act aims to help children who are low income, living in foster care or diagnosed with chronic illnesses or disabilities.

But there is no public disclosure of how much the schools focus on any of these things. Their requests with the state to qualify for the donations — and therefore claims they make about how many students they serve in these categories — are not made public. But it is clear that the donations, refunded with tax dollars, are flowing into segregation academies.

In its latest annual report, the Midsouth Association of Independent Schools, founded in 1968 by a group of segregation academies, said the Mississippi tax credits are now a “crucial source of funding.” (The association’s ethics guidelines state any member school “shall not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, color, national, or ethnic origin in the administration of its admission practices.”)

ProPublica found that segregation academies represent at least a fifth of all schools benefiting from the tax credits.

Central Holmes is one. The school has received $812,150 from the tax credit-fueled donations since 2020. Those resources help it improve academic programs, update technology and facilitate professional development, said the school’s headmaster, Chris Terry.

As of the last federal private school survey, Central Holmes reported a student body that was 82% white — a shift from 95% white a decade ago but far from representative of the community around it. Holmes County is barely more than 15% white.

Terry, who’s been headmaster since 2022, noted that during that time, the school has had Asian, Hispanic and Black students “enjoying success.” Among them were a Black valedictorian and homecoming queen. “To me, this shows our school’s desire to move past the past and forge a new future for our students and families,” Terry said in an email.

He added that he couldn’t comment on the school’s origin because he wasn’t alive at the time.

Those who were alive when it opened in 1965 voiced differing visions for the future. In 1970, a Black legislator who represented Central Holmes’ district predicted that white students would return to public schools in “two or three years.” But Central Holmes’ board chair, a former legislator, disagreed. He predicted the school would “go on indefinitely.”

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