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MICHAEL GREHL, Editor

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Blow To City's Schools

WHEN DR. Willie W. Herenton was appointed superintendent of the Memphis city schools, he said he feared that an increasingly black school system would result in a decline in the financial support that the city was willing to give the schools. Has Memphis seen the first sign that his fear is materializing?

Did the City Council, by refusing to grant the Board of Education the funds it requested, announce to the world that this city doesn't think public education deserves the highest possible priority anymore because school enrollment has become predominantly black? There will be many, here and elsewhere, who interpret the council vote exactly that way. They will take little comfort, considering council attitudes, if the school board budget is reopened at the next meeting because of a mathematical error.

At the Tuesday meeting City Council Chairman Jeff Sanford commented, "One of these days we're going to have to realize a moral obligation to support the school system."

And, if they're unable to go that far, the city's elected officials should at least realize that Memphis can't make the progress everyone wants unless it has a strong school system. Young people won't be adequately educated and trained to be productive adults. Industries won't locate here or expand for lack of the work force and vigorous markets they need. And the city's image will grow drabber and more uninviting.

As in years past, the board will now turn to county government for a bailout. But the schools are Memphis' responsibility first. And they're a responsibility of the first order.

The council approved Mayor Wyeth Chandler's budget request on the grounds that it would provide about the same level of services as this year's budget. The schools, however, apparently won't be able to operate at the same level. One estimate is that the schools will receive \$545,000 less than a continuation budget. This year, their share of the overall city tax rate was 40.62 per cent. Under the new rates, they'll receive 33.87 per cent.

Aren't the schools as important as any other area of government — even as important as police

and fire protection? In the future, this city will depend more than it does now on the fullest possible use of its human resources. The extent to which it can and does develop those resources will have a direct effect on the control of crime, welfare, unemployment, the disease and misery that germinates in substandard housing and, in general, the costs of poverty.

Business and civic leaders acknowledged this fundamental truth of urban life last year when they promised to set up various special programs in the schools. The programs were viewed as ways both to expand community support and to enrich educational opportunities.

But no effort by business, no matter how ambitious or laudable, will have anywhere near a maximum effect if the basic programs of the school system, itself, don't receive full support.

SOME COUNCIL members seemed sympathetic to the Board of Education. Mrs. Barbara Sonnenburg, herself a former board member, successfully moved to increase the amount Chandler had recommended for the schools by more than \$1 million.

But others were little short of callous in their reaction to the board. A. D. Alissandratos commented, "Our contributions to the school budget have increased handsomely." So has inflation. And so have the demands on the schools to provide more and better education and more personal attention to students with special needs. Ed McBrayer and Thomas Todd opposed the overall budget, including the schools' share because it's "too high," whatever that means.

And then there was Chandler, who wanted the schools to get even less than the council voted. What has the mayor to do with recommending school budgets in the first place? What does it say of his leadership that he apparently was willing to take funds from the schools to help make the budgets of the agencies under his control look better?

City officials haven't performed well. But, what's worse, they've made it more difficult for the schools to perform well. And, in the long run, the performance of the schools is probably more important than that of the council and the mayor.



There is an almost incredible irony in this Garner cartoon's appearance in a newspaper whose long-enduring "Hambone's Meditations" still finds a wide local audience--though no longer (thank God!) in this newspaper.

Another measure of racial progress since the stormy sixties: Dr. Herenton, School Superintendent, is black.