

BLACK BOARDING SCHOOLS

Written by Jacqueline Lawler

I had space to let me be

Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Choir Boy* takes place in an all-boy, all-black boarding school. It opens with Pharus Jonathan Young, singing the school song:

*When we walk with the Lord
In the light of His Word,
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will,
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.*



The world of *Choir Boy* is immediately evocative, carrying the weight of over two centuries of slavery and racism in the United States. Too often while educating African-Americans, the government was hoping that students would not think to ask *whom* they should trust or *why* they should obey.

At slavery's end, there remained a black population who could not read or write, and a population of whites who had no intention of teaching them. It became the responsibility of abolitionists and educated African Americans to provide the next generation with an education.

One such man was Dr. Laurence Jones, who founded the [Piney Woods Country Life School](#) in Mississippi. It is one of only four black boarding schools in existence in the States today. Founded in 1909, Dr. Jones, an educated African-American man from St. Louis, took it upon himself to teach young black boys how to read and write. By befriending local businessmen and engaging his community, Dr. Jones was able to secure land for the school, a building where classes could be held, and resources to keep the school up and running against extraordinary odds, including a White Supremacist governor. Today, over 100 years later, Piney Woods educates both boys and girls – many of them on scholarship to supplement the \$23,000 in tuition. Nearly 100% of students graduate, and 97% of them receive college acceptance letters. (Whiteman, 2015)

But is there still a need for schools like Piney Woods? After all, \$23,000 a year is expensive when public schools are available for free. Haven't we learned that integration promotes equality? That separate is not equal?

In order to understand the important role that black boarding schools play in our education system, it is useful to revisit the time when there were only all-black schools. The age of segregation and Jim Crow.

W.E.B. DuBois said, *The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back into slavery.* (Alexander, 2012)

The civil rights activist was referring to the infamous Jim Crow Laws which kept whites and blacks segregated from one another in all manners of public and private life.

A list of various Jim Crow Laws can be found on the [National Park Service](#) website. In the school system, students were kept from learning in the same building as one another:

The schools for white children and the schools for negro children shall be conducted separately.

They were kept from sharing materials, as though their race was contagious:

Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools, but shall continue to be used by the race first using them.

They were kept from playing together:

It shall be unlawful for any amateur white baseball team to play baseball on any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of a playground devoted to the negro race, and it shall be unlawful for any amateur colored baseball team to play baseball in any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of any playground devoted to the white race. (National Park Service, n.d.)

The integration of schools is seen as a major victory within the Civil Rights Movement. It seemed to usher in a new generation of whites and blacks who would be interacting with one another. It seemed to be the manifestation of Dr. Martin Luther King's dream. (Dr. Martin Luther King, 1963)

But there was an unfortunate consequence of integration; white families who were so inclined, and who could afford it, pulled their kids out to private schools. County lines were gerrymandered to benefit wealthy communities, resulting in poverty-stricken areas with insufficient resources to improve themselves or educate their students. And the black schools that had once served their communities so well slowly but surely disappeared. (Hannah-Jones, 2015) Where there were formerly over 100 black boarding schools, there are now only four. Today, African Americans are fighting for, ostensibly, the same right to learn as Dr. Jones was in 1909. (Applebome, 1994)

A little over a year ago, This American Life produced a two-part episode titled, "The Problem We All Live With." That problem is the de-facto racial segregation that remains inherent in public schools. In 2013, the graduation rate for black males was 59%, compared with 80% of white males. (Schott Foundation, 2015) We know that this is not because they are less capable: schools like Piney Woods prove that notion to be false. We also know that integration in public schools is extraordinarily successful. (Hannah-Jones, 2015) But the success of Piney Woods demonstrates that giving black

students a concentrated environment where they are surrounded by successful, driven students who look like them is absolutely vital: we hardly have the luxury of waiting for another generation to see what each new pendulum swing will bring us.

In a recent [Atlantic profile of Piney Woods](#), a student, Maya Riddles, opens by playing her ukulele, and singing a song that is different from Pharus Young, reminding us that while education teaches students to keep order and respect authority, it also expands the mind, challenges the assumptions with which we were raised, and encourages free, unbridled thinking. She sings,

*To break every chain, break every chain, break every chain
To break every chain, break every chain, break every chain*

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