

## LESSONS FROM THE “LOST YEAR” by Stephan Shaw

Most people are familiar with what happened in Little Rock in September 1957. Nine black students were denied entrance to Central High School by the Arkansas National Guard acting under the order of Governor Orval Faubus. A standoff then ensued between the governor and President Dwight Eisenhower prompting the president to federalize the National Guard and send federal troops to accomplish the enrollment of the students, who became known as the “Little Rock Nine.”

Most people are not familiar, however, with what happened in Little Rock one year later. On September 15, 1958, Governor Faubus closed all four of Little Rock’s public high schools to prevent further integration. The schools remained closed for the entire 1958-59 school year, which came to be known in Little Rock as the “lost year.”

I discovered the “lost year” while doing research for my debut novel, *Glory in the Dust*, which is set in a small delta town in Arkansas that integrates its high school at a similar time to that of Central High School. I wanted to know more. I read a wonderful book by Sondra Gordy called *Finding the Lost Year: What Happened When Little Rock Closed Its Public Schools* that informs this article and most of what I now know on the subject.

The “lost year” is a terrible, fascinating, and largely forgotten part of Arkansas’ history. There are lessons to learn from it. Lessons about what happens to students when schools close. The serious and often detrimental effects it can have on them. Lessons we should eagerly receive given our schools closing now due to COVID-19.

When Governor Faubus made his announcement to close the schools three days before they were scheduled to open, there was confusion among the 3,665 black and white students as they tried to understand what it meant, when and if there would be school, and how they should proceed in the meantime.

Even in 1958, technology was the first solution offered—teachers taught on television in the four core subjects: English, history, science, and math. But this arrangement lasted only two weeks. When it ceased, students often were forced to make difficult, life-changing decisions.

Many students enrolled in private school in Little Rock or nearby public school outside the Little Rock School District. Others attended school in different parts of the state, living with family or friends. And others left Arkansas altogether. Finally, there were some who did not go to school anywhere and lost an entire year of education, and among them were a number who never attended school again.

On the surface, that is what happened. But to truly learn the impact of the “lost year” on students, we have to go deeper. We must first acknowledge that though what happened was hard on both black and white students, it was disproportionately harder on blacks. After all, at that

time, blacks lived in a segregated society, a society that was not equal. This inequality, meant to be resolved, in part, through school integration, ran through everything.

The disparities were apparent from the time classes began on television. Only white teachers were involved in the presentations. They sometimes taught from new books only white students had. And when they gave assignments from them, they only gave them to whites. Moreover, back then, the median income for blacks was less than half of what it was for whites and no alternatives existed for students whose families didn't have a television and couldn't afford one.

Once the television presentations ended, the gap widened between black and white students because of the difficulty blacks faced finding alternative schooling. I mentioned earlier that many students enrolled in private school in Little Rock, but the reality is these were only whites, the schools were not open to blacks. According to Gordy's book, "All but seven percent of the 2,915 displaced white students found alternative schooling, while fifty percent of the 750 blacks found none." Nothing sums up the great divide between black and white students during the "lost year" better than that statistic.

Although there are vastly different reasons for the schools closing in 1958 and now, a simple truth is shared between them—school closing affects everyone, especially those from historically oppressed racial groups and those with low-income.

We see this when we look back at the disparities of the "lost year" and we see it when we look now at what is happening with COVID-19. In many ways, history is repeating itself. Again, the schools closing is harder on certain students. Again, many of these students are not provided basic educational resources. And again, many of these already disadvantaged students only find themselves more so.

If we are to learn anything from the "lost year" and now COVID-19 that can help our students, it is that to have a level playing field we have to actually make it level. A start would be providing all students with the basic educational resources that are necessary to learn in today's academic landscape: internet access and web-enabled devices.

As the school closings caused by COVID-19 again reveal the hurdles that so many of our students must overcome, it is a lesson that we have not done enough and need to do more. We should not again allow students to fall further behind. Providing basic educational resources will not fix everything for the students affected, but it will help us move forward in our continued fights against racism and inequity. And that doesn't just help some students, it helps everyone.